



universität  
wien

# Dissertation

Titel der Dissertation

## **The Presentation of the Character of the Climber and Climbing Philosophy in North American and British Texts**

Verfasserin

**Lidiya Wukowits**

angestrebter akademischer Grad  
Doktor der Philosophie (Dr. phi.)

Wien, 2009

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt: A 092 343  
Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt: 343 Anglistik und Amerikanistik  
Betreuer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz



## Contents

### Part I

#### Overview

Introduction	1
General Aspects	3
Mountains in Literature	10
History of Mountaineering	28
Mountaineering Fiction	38
• The Reasons for Climbing and Writing About It	41
The Presentation of Character. An Outline	43
• Climbing Philosophy	48
• Spiritual Corruption	49
• The Meaning of Climbing	49

### Part II

#### **The Presentation of the Character of the Climber in Classic Mountaineering Literature**

##### Upon That Mountain. Eric Shipton

• The Book	51
• The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime	52
• The Presentation of Character. Climbing Philosophy	53

##### High Adventure. Edmund Hillary

• The Book	58
• The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime	58
• The Presentation of Character. Climbing Philosophy	60

##### The Ascent of Rum Doodle. W.E. Bowman

• The Novel	62
• The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime	63
• The Presentation of Character. Climbing Philosophy	64

### Part III

#### **The Presentation of the Character of the Climber in Modern Climbing Literature**

##### Solo Faces. James Salter

The Novel	69
The Plot	71
The Landscape of Climbing	73
• The Sublime	77
The Presentation of Character	79
• The Protagonist	80
• Other Climbing Characters	89
• Susceptibility to Superstitions	92

Climbing philosophy	94
• Spiritual corruption	96
The Meaning of Climbing	101

*The Ascent.* Jeff Long

The Novel	103
The Plot	105
The Landscape of Climbing	107
• The Sublime	117
The Presentation of Character	121
• The Protagonist	121
• Other Climbing Characters: Daniel	125
• Susceptibility to Superstitions	130
Climbing Philosophy	134
• Spiritual Corruption	136
The Meaning of Climbing	142

*Into Thin Air.* Jon Krakauer

The Book	145
The Landscape of Climbing	148
• The Sublime	157
The Presentation of Character	160
• The Author and Other Climbers	160
• Susceptibility to Superstitions	166
Climbing Philosophy	168
• Spiritual Corruption	171
The Meaning of Climbing	174

*The Climb. Tragic Ambitions on Everest.* Anatoly Boukreev, W. DeWalt

The Book	176
The Landscape of Climbing	178
• The Sublime	179
The Presentation of Character	181
• The Author and Other Climbers	181
• Susceptibility to Superstitions	184
Climbing Philosophy	186
• Spiritual Corruption	186
The Meaning of Climbing	189

**Part IV**

**The Presentation of the Character of the Climber and Climbing Philosophy in**

**Women's Climbing Literature**

Climbing Women	190
----------------	-----

One Green Bottle. Elizabeth Coxhead

The Novel	192
The Plot	193
The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime	194
The Presentation of Character	197
• The Protagonist	197
• Other Climbing Characters	200
Climbing Philosophy	202
The Meaning of Climbing	203

Beyond the Mountain. Elizabeth Arthur

The Novel	204
The Plot	205
The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime	206
The Presentation of the Character	209
• The Protagonist	209
• Other Climbing Characters	210
Climbing Philosophy	212
The Meaning of Climbing	214

**Part V**

**Presentation of the Character of the Climber and Climbing Philosophy:  
New Tendencies**

**Gay Mountaineering Literature**Todhra. Dennis Gray

The Novel	217
The Plot	219
The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime	221
The Presentation of Character	224
• The Protagonist	224
• Other Climbing Characters	227
Climbing Philosophy	230
The Meaning of Climbing	231

**Part VI**

Summary	232
Bibliography	237
Index	243
Abstract (English)	247
Abstract (Deutsch)	249
Lebenslauf	251



## Overview

### Introduction

The topic “The Presentation of the Character of the Climber and Climbing Philosophy” is a result of my long-time interest in the subject of mountaineering/climbing and has been inspired by a considerable amount of fiction and non-fiction written about this activity. The research is an attempt to provide an overview of genres and types as well as to offer a comparison of themes and characters existent in mountaineering fiction and non-fiction. The focus of this study will be the presentation of the character of the mountaineer and climbing philosophy.

The introductory section of the thesis will be devoted to an overview of existing studies of travel literature related to mountaineering and climbing, to the presentation of the key terms and issues and background information on mountaineering.

The main part of the thesis is divided into four sections, all of which will deal with the comparison of actual mountaineering accounts and mountaineering fiction in terms of the presentation of the character of a climber and climbing philosophy, the construction of the character, and the transformation it has gone through in the last hundred years. The first section of this part deals with the classics of mountaineering literature dating back to roughly the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second section focuses on two fictional and two non-fictional works of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and constitutes the core of the thesis. The third section offers an overview of women’s climbing literature. In its general tendencies it has followed the course of the development seen in men’s mountaineering literature but it also has additional aspects considered on the basis of two fictional works. The fourth section presents the new tendencies in climbing literature and discusses the first example of gay mountaineering fiction.

The last part of the research draws conclusions and summarises the findings of this study.

Within the scope of this thesis the extent to which fiction draws on mountaineering history and personal accounts will be considered. I will analyse the motives for writing mountaineering fiction and non-fiction and offer evidence that personal experiences in mountaineering oftentimes are a strong stimulus for writing as a means to re-examine experiences, to revise preconceptions, to address the feeling of

guilt, to remember people lost, finally, to explain one's feelings to the world, and thus, to become more accepted.

Among the objectives of the thesis are the wish to place mountaineering fiction in the context of travel literature and to try to define mountaineering fiction and to examine where the line between fact and fiction can be drawn in mountaineering literature. This research aims at the analysis of the themes and characters surfacing in mountaineering literature and their shifts in the course of time. The thesis will illustrate that both fiction and non-fiction are oftentimes written to come to terms with one's own experiences. The role of the landscape in the presentation of characters will be studied because a 'foreign' setting is one of the essentials of mountaineering writing as it emphasises (or reveals) the traits not so obvious in an ordinary location. Many a time the places dealt with in both climbing accounts and fiction are only a few miles away from the common world, yet both emotional and physical factors create an unfamiliar setting.

I will try to find reasons for somebody to trade a comfortable sofa and a cup of coffee with a good book for the discomfort of a tent in the middle of a snow storm and an option of paying with one's life for a weird addiction. Additionally I will examine the presentation of the climber in mountaineering literature and offer evidence that there exists a certain universality in the presentation of a climber usually shown as a representative of one of several categories:

- a gentleman-mountaineer, a heroic figure,
- an average climber who will never develop into a prodigy climber,
- a prodigy climber, a cheerful vagabond, and an outlaw to some extent,
- a woman who is a man's match in climbing.

The thesis will analyse the meaning of the climb and will show that climbing may be an attempt to escape from the world, a quest for enlightenment, a metaphor for success and achievement in the climber's life.

The study will mostly, but not exclusively, deal with long texts (novels, personal accounts), but will also include the examination of short texts (short stories and articles). The main focus of the study will rest on the individual, but as an integral part of a group. The research will be based on British and North American writings.



## **General Aspects**

Travel literature, both factual and fictional, has always excited much curiosity and attention. It gives the possibility of casting a glance at places one has never been to or of learning about experiences one has never had (and sometimes is not so eager to acquire). Yet there are fewer and fewer places that have remained unvisited, for nowadays possibilities for travel are infinitely greater than ever before. The social value of travel and the motives that lie behind it have changed. The last several decades have emphasised the distinction between travel as a modern activity and the functions it traditionally assumed in other historical and cultural contexts (the majority of travels was motivated by geopolitical, religious, military and economic factors). In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of unexplored places decreased drastically,<sup>1</sup> yet the number of people undertaking some sort of travel increased, thus it became a challenge to sustain the myth of the brave, undaunted traveller. Therefore, in this post-exploration age (see Cocker 144) there has been a tendency to attribute more importance not to the destination of travel, but rather to its mode, the aspect that nowadays tends to be pushed to extremes.

The term “post-exploration age,” as used by Percy G. Adams in his *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (82), encompasses the experiences of not a well-prepared and knowledgeable explorer but rather alludes to the experiences of an average individual without any special training in languages spoken in the visited locations, in handling pack animals or negotiating any ‘explorer-necessary equipment.’ The post-exploration age is characterised by a quest for personal experiences (valuable for an individual) rather than for universal knowledge (valuable for a country or humanity, for example).

Without any doubt, mountaineering and climbing are varieties of travel or tourism. And these types of travel still have a number of unvisited places to offer, as well as sometimes unprecedented ways to get to these places, thus allowing the individual to acquire new experiences. They also offer the possibility to sustain a myth about a pioneer, a brave and undaunted traveller. In its turn such a figure has always excited curiosity if not admiration, and has given great possibilities to fictional exploitation, especially as regards romantic setting and characters. Thus, it is natural to view mountaineering/climbing literature in the context of travel literature (factual and

---

<sup>1</sup> Here “unexplored places” include mountains (especially 8,000m and higher) the first ascents of which were done in the 20<sup>st</sup> century, for example, the summit of Everest was reached only in 1953.

fictional). Travel fiction was a development of travel literature,<sup>2</sup> and similarly, expanded into mountaineering literature, where climbing accounts provided a rich basis for fiction.

Mostly, when travel writing is referred to, the actual accounts of travels are meant. According to the tradition of travel and travel writing, especially in the Western culture of the 19-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a traveller took time and effort to record his or her journey in great detail: encounters, experiences, impressions, thoughts provoked by the travel. The purpose of the majority of these factual accounts (in addition to entertaining) was educational, namely widening the intellectual horizons of the traveller or/and the readership. Such transfers of experience into knowledge were rather extensive, very informative but sometimes laden with too many details. For instance, the Victorian period offers the notorious case of Richard Burton's twenty-five travel-narratives, few of which are under 500 pages; David Livingstone's six books amounting to 3,500 pages with cross-references to so many different South-African tribes, chiefs, and the like that they were bound to confuse a most scrupulous historian or ethnologist (see Cocker 6).

Generally speaking, travel writers were not discouraged by the thought that their accounts might be too dry. Their primary goal was to record everything they had come across. In these cases "distortion of the facts for literary effect would have been an abuse of [the] principal objective, which was to tell the truth" (Cocker 24). The purely didactic purpose of writing travel accounts prevailed, and the need for accuracy in recording the events was great. Though, for instance, Burton's accounts of exotic countries were not only extremely informative, but also included many sensational aspects.

Undoubtedly, the argument that many of the so-called accounts, especially samples dating back to 'the young days of the world' contained, at times, more fiction than facts (the stories of monsters, demons, sirens or Cyclops, for instance) is valid, but such writings were presented as non-fiction, as facts. Yet, it was natural, because "the tradition of traveller as liar is, in fact, as old as that for belletristic writers in general and for authors of long prose fiction in particular" (Adams 82).

As mentioned before, travel fiction was, to a certain extent, a logical development of travel narratives, the latter being of profound importance for the evolution of the novel. In reality, travel fiction became a mirror of Western society's

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Travel literature' is used very broadly here, also referring to oral accounts of travels. It has to be pointed out, however, that in the Middle Ages such travel narratives included a significant portion of fiction (see below).

trends, providing clues to the then popular travel destinations. If the accounts of travels to Africa or the Orient were popular at a specific point in time, then the same destinations found their reflection in the fiction of that period. From the time mountaineering gained more recognition, mountaineering fiction started to enjoy growing attention. Travel writing “supplied fiction with the realistic, yet often romantic because exotic, details that pure fiction employed in increasing amounts and with increasing scientific accuracy” (Adams 109). Besides, as one began running into a problem of finding new places to report on, one tried to find new ways of writing about the places visited:

Sometimes [...] the focus ceased to be the novelty of the data, and became the manner of its presentation. Retaining its foreign setting, the travel book could become a polished work of scholarship or memoir, or both. Even its status as non-fictional writing has come under review. Authors have felt at liberty to record the sequence of their travel experiences, or to interpret events in the loosest and most imaginative fashion, or to substitute a deeply personal enquiry for the conventionally random stream of external text. At times they have even thought it more appropriate to move off into pure invention. (Cocker 7-8)

Speaking about travels and travel writings, there is an ever-present problem of drawing the line between fact and fiction. At the same time, there are questions of how to regard a purely fictional writing and what to expect from it. Should it try to approximate the truth? Does it need this approximation? Firstly, the truth is, to a certain extent, a subjective notion, and, secondly, fiction is a product of the imagination; it is expected to be plausible but is not expected to be the truth. Moreover, literature (fiction or non-fiction) has always been an amalgamation of the objective and the subjective, of historical details, realistic settings, descriptions of customs and traditions, personal impressions and contemplations, adventures and experiences. The extent of the combination of the subjective and the objective could be the only good measure of the difference between fact and fiction. Thus, “it is important to recognise that [...] travel writing, no matter how tenaciously its author clings to the facts as he or she sees them, is still an arbitrary and highly specialised version of reality” (Cocker 95). Such interrelation between the rational and the irrational, the subjective and the objective, the romantic and the realistic is of paramount importance to the development of both travel writing and travel fiction. And there exists a “close relationship between fictional methods of achieving concreteness and those established ones of travel literature and, [...] it is a well-known] fact that the novel borrowed so many of its details from travel

narratives or from the histories and geographies that depended on them” (Adams 109-110).

Thus, the question arises of what exactly travel writing is. As it has been pointed out, “travel writing” normally refers to non-fiction, thus, to simplify the matter the terms “travel writing/work/narrative,” on the one hand, and “travel fiction,” on the other, can be used (for the moment, fiction will be understood “as a designation for an invented narrative – novel, novella, short story” (Cohn 1)). Manfred Jahn suggests the following definition of and differentiation between a fictional and a non-fictional narrative:

A fictional narrative presents an imaginary narrator’s account of a story that happened in an imaginary world. A fictional narrative is appreciated for its entertainment and educational value, possibly also for providing a vision of characters who *might* exist or might have existed, and a vision of things that *might* happen or could have happened. Although a fictional narrative may freely refer to actual people, places and events, it cannot be used as evidence of what happened in the real world.

A nonfictional narrative (also factual narrative) presents a real-life person’s account of a real-life story. Unless there are reasons for questioning an author’s credibility, a factual narrative can serve as evidence of what happened in the real world. In principle, the author of a factual narrative is accountable for the truth of its statements and can always be asked *How do you know?* (Jahn N2.2)

Thus mountaineering fiction can be defined as a fictional narrative which focuses on mountaineering themes, settings and characters presented in a realistic way, and where considerable textual space is devoted to them. Mountaineering non-fiction can be defined as a non-fictional narrative dealing with the same topics, characters and settings. Both categories can be placed under the umbrella-term of “travel literature,” and both are unified by a characteristic feature of travel books – the theme of a quest, no matter whether a quest for understanding lives in some remote communities, the quest for monetary gain, or a search for illusory happiness drawn from the ‘primitivism’ of life in nature, a quest to quench a wider intellectual and spiritual restlessness, where new places bring a sense of inner renewal, sometimes substituting physical for intellectual travel. Thus the theme of a quest becomes a key characteristic, yet the notion of travel literature comprises so much in terms of form, themes, and genres that its boundaries are all but easily definable. Paul Fussell, a cultural and literary historian, and professor emeritus of English literature at the University of Pennsylvania, warns against confusing travel books and guide books, as the latter

[...] are not autobiographical and are not sustained by a narrative exploiting the devices of fiction. A guide book is addressed to those who plan to follow the traveller, doing what he has done, but more selectively. A travel book, at its

purest, is addressed to those who do not plan to follow the traveller at all, but who require the exotic or comic anomalies, wonders, and scandals of the literary form *romance* which their own place or time cannot entirely supply. Travel books are a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or a romance – claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality [emphasis added]. (203)

Fussell singles out the categories of autobiography, biography, memoir, epic, a fact that poses some additional problems, for instance, where to place a text with a journey as part of an autobiography, or a book describing a journey in combination with a war. Is it a war memoir or travel writing, or both? Mark Cocker, a British author and naturalist, who deals in his books with modern responses to the wild, suggests that travel books belong to a broader range of non-fictional writing, the category which can comprise “autobiography, biography, history, journalism, sociological or anthropological study and war memoir; or a blend of these different elements” (Cocker 113). As to the interrelation between travel writing and travel fiction and their literary merits, Cocker believes that:

Although novelists, like travel writers, might draw extensively on their own personal experiences, the final product is not thought to describe in any literal sense their individual lives. The work is a product of fancy: internally coherent, self-contained, freed from the limitations of the actual. No critic could condemn a fiction by reference to the material from which it was constructed. At best travel books are a sort of adjunct to this real literature. (114)

However, non-fiction can affect the reader more deeply because it narrates real events that have possibly changed or even claimed somebody's life. In this case, believes Cocker, the reader's emotional response to it will be infinitely greater than to any piece of fiction.

While narrating his or her own experiences and adventures, a travel writer can often draw upon works and experiences of other travellers to create a more complete picture of places, people, customs, etc. A very similar process is essential to the creation of fiction, which, in certain respect, finds itself in a less favourable position than non-fiction:

[...] one of the great strengths of travel writing, and one of the reasons why it commands attention in a way that fiction might not, is that it purports to be a record of fact. Moreover, it frequently chronicles real lives at their most extreme – the most daring and dangerous actions and the most extraordinary incidents in a setting of rich unfamiliarity. It is perhaps a hallmark of the successful travel work that it can convey its audience to an environment entirely outside their experience, which is yet authentic and even sometimes extant. ... There are even occasions when the author of travel adventure, almost paradoxically, is

unlimited by conditions that might restrain the fictional writer. The guiding principle in the narrative need not be a sense of what the audience will accept as plausible, but a fidelity to what happened, no matter how incredible this might seem. (Cocker 72)

In terms of mountaineering writings certain questions are raised at times: what can be considered fiction? When fragments of a reliable account and autobiography are intertwined in a story, where does fact stop and fiction begin? There is a growing tendency towards more subjectivity in the accounts, that is, a narrator's increased willingness to reveal how the journey has affected him or her. And more and more often the accounts, historical facts and biographies become fictionalized.

Thanks to the merits and despite the demerits of writing travel fiction and non-fiction, both sides of the Atlantic can boast great names.<sup>3</sup> The examination of their background will yield clues to the kind of people who travelled and wrote about travels. Mostly they belong to the solid middle class who could afford the expenses. The same was true of the English.<sup>4</sup> English travellers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tended to be military men, especially those who travelled in Asia. There was a certain difference in the destinations of the Americans and the Englishmen, yet the general direction was the same – eastward. The former would largely undertake a journey to the Old World, while the latter would go to the East, mainly India and Tibet, due to the colonial situation. In this respect British and American travellers were of different sorts. The English were professional explorers, travelling in the territories of the Empire and the lands that might have been of interest to the Empire, whereas the Americans were mostly amateurs travelling for pleasure, to broaden their horizons, and, to some extent, to learn about the cultural heritage they could associate with, to find a closure with the historical/ancestral past. Whatever the case, foreign travel was a fundamental experience prompted not only by the need of information, but also by the need to see around the corner, a sense of and a desire for novelty, and, very importantly, the need of departing and homecoming. Cocker believes that “the sheer domesticity of the national landscape lies behind a decision which all travellers have made. It is also

---

<sup>3</sup> In the USA of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries they are: Ann Bancroft, Julian Hawthorne, Henry James, Tom Miller, John Muir, Mark Twain; there are also some less famous names, for instance, Bill Bryson, F. Marion Crawford, Edward Everett Hale, Erik Hansen, James Jarves, Peter Jenkins, Jon Krakauer, W. W. Story, and Bayard Taylor.

<sup>4</sup> Iain Aitch, Maurice Baring, Gertrude Bell, James Theodore Bent, Charles Darwin (*The Voyage of the Beagle*, 1839), Mark Elliott, Graham Greene, Sir Henry Holland, Aldous Leonard Huxley, Mary Henrietta Kingsley, Norman Lewis, Percy Sykes and Evelyn Waugh, to name but a few.

perhaps the one issue on which such a litigious assembly has unanimously agreed: the need to depart” (13). Moreover, as it has been mentioned before, with time the number of places unseen and unheard of considerably decreased, yet more factors encouraging travel emerged: greater speed and convenience due to transportation improvements, expanding knowledge about the world, hence less fear of new encounters, the ever greater need of new experiences, etc. These factors facilitated travel but they, too, brought a split in the notion of travel – tourism was born as a variation of travel. Ever since there has been a distinct difference between the two despite the fact that both, tourists and travellers “are temporary migrants to foreign places” (Cocker 2). A traveller seeks new places and experiences, for him/her the ultimate goal is to learn of a life of a foreign place in a pure form, without any intrusion of a traveller’s native world; the absence of the familiar adds value to the travel. It is quite the opposite with a tourist who is “essentially a social animal” and seeks “an environment in which the characteristics that render a country distinct and even alien, are carefully controlled or totally eliminated” (Cocker 2).

The same holds true in the mountaineering world. The climbing elite (‘travellers’) is formed by the mountaineers who strive to set themselves apart by daring deeds, by breaking trails of new routes, by attempting numerous ‘firsts’: a first ascent, a first direct route, a first solo, a first winter ascent, etc. These are the things that bring about a sense of exclusiveness and are an inseparable part of the mountaineers’ identity. The ‘lower cast’ of mountaineers (‘tourists’) consists of people who cherish the idea of a controlled adventure; they, unlike mountaineers proper, are *led* to the mountains, are taken care of (the circumstances permitting) and pay for such services. This phenomenon is known as guided mountaineering expeditions.

Nowadays all such activities are very popular. Mountains are believed to possess a certain aura of purity, heroic spirit, romanticism, noble savageness, physical primitivism leading to spiritual growth, natural tranquillity antagonistic to the madness of civilization. In terms of literary history each epoch since the 18<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by either one or a combination of several such ideas about mountains.

## **Mountains in Literature**

The perception of mountains as inspirational and sublime places may be traced back to the biblical or even pre-biblical times. Although mountain climbing was not practiced at that time, the symbolism of the mountains has always been present serving as a metaphor for physical and spiritual superiority; a mountain was often regarded a seat of gods (Mount Olympus), a home of heroes both in Eastern and Western civilization. The earth has always been associated with the mundane and human, whereas peaks “were spontaneously regarded as the most apt material to express, through allegories, transcendental states of consciousness, inner spiritual realizations, and apparitions of extraordinary modes of being, often portrayed figuratively as gods and supernatural beings” (Evola 10).

A mountain was also seen as a timeless place, where one can be closer to god and where one experiences sacramental visions and revelations, a place for prayer and meditation, for contemplating the world, the self and the relation between the two (the Biblical Mount Sinai). At times, mountains were attributed a divine nature (for instance, the Afghani name of Annapurna is the Goddess Rich in Sustenance, or the Harvest Goddess, the Tibetan name of Everest, Chomolungma, in translation means Mother, Goddess of the Earth).

In human history, the attitude to the mountains has gone through considerable transformations, including the concept of the mountains as warts on the face of the Earth, popular in the Middle Ages until the late 1600s, and then returning again to the vision of the mountains as the sublime places.

Thus, depending on the stage or peculiarity of society development and, sometimes, fashion, mountains were viewed as either places inhabited by monsters, Cyclops, beasts, or by gods, so they were either places of gloom or those of glory, using Marjorie H. Nicolson’s terms (see 3). But whatever the case, mountains were inevitably seen as awe-inspiring, and not a proper place for ordinary human beings. Respectively, those who tried to climb mountains were breaking the existing conventions and beliefs, thus landing themselves in the ‘outcast’ category of society, fitting into the rule ‘what cannot be understood is usually feared.’ In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and the early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the dominant theory regarding mountains could be exemplified by the opinions of George Hakewill (1) and Thomas Burnet (53-54), who believed that mountains were of sinful origin, warts on the face of the Earth that had emerged as a result of the Flood. The end



of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a change in the philosophical vision of the world and the mountains turned yet again into a shrine of nature's beauty. The duality of attitude 'ugliness – beauty,' indicative of the subsequent shift to 'beauty' is most often attributed to Thomas Burnet and a passage in his *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* describing the magnificence of the mountains, on the one hand, but calling them "strangely rude, and ruin like," "heaps of Stones and Rubbish" and having "neither form nor beauty, nor shape, nor order" (Burnet 111-112), on the other. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century wore on, there was a dramatic shift in the perception of the mountains. The earth and the mountains became worthy subjects of exploration, which was triggered by a number of findings in the scientific world: the invention of the telescope, the discovery of space and its objects, Newton's optimistic concept of the cosmos (in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century), according to which everything was seen as a part of the universe. This shift also brought a sense of cosmic order and a re-evaluation of the surface of the world. "Thinking about the newly realized infinity of space induced the same emotions as thinking about the Deity" (Lester 89). These were only a few factors contributing to the development of the concept of the sublime.

Despite the general use of the term, a specific definition has been the subject of debate in the course of philosophic and literary history. A generalizing definition of the sublime is: "[t]he aesthetic feeling aroused by experiences too overwhelming in scale to be appreciated as beautiful by the senses. The awe produced by standing on the brink of the Grand Canyon or the terror induced by witnessing a hurricane are properly said to be sublime" (Kamerling).

The concept of the sublime can boast of almost two thousand years of history, taking its beginnings in pseudo-Longinus' treatise *Peri hypsous* in the first century A.D. From then until the seventeenth century there had been no major interest in the sublime until this treatise was translated and published in 1674. The concept received the next development as an aesthetic quality in nature and a notion different from beauty in the early eighteenth century in the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, and John Dennis. They expressed an admiration of the frightening and irregular forms of landscape. This idea was further elaborated on in Joseph Addison's consolidation of Cooper's and Dennis' concepts of the sublime in *The Spectator* in the essays "On the Pleasures of the Imagination." All three Englishmen had travelled across the Alps in the same period of time and wrote about the exhilaration and horrors of the experience as well as aesthetic pleasure deriving from such contradictory qualities.

It is worth noting that Addison did not use the term “sublime,” substituting for it absolute superlatives of grandeur and spaciousness (see Nicolson *Dictionary* 333-337). The feeling of the sublime (which could be of two shades instigated by either horror or shock, or by admiration) can be evoked by the boundless horizons that make one’s mind expand, and equally by the imagining of such horizons and natural grandeur. Thus the sublime prevails over beauty and is of a grander nature and can be excited only by greatness or vastness and not, for example, by a beautiful art object.

True prominence to the concept of the sublime was given by Edmund Burke and further extended by Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Georg Wilhelm Hegel, Artur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea of the sublime seemed to have been forgotten only to be revived by Theodor Adorno and J.-F. Lyotard in the late 20th century.

Burke recognized the sense of the sublime evoked by massive, rugged, and broken surfaces or by height and depth. He argued that the sublime and the beautiful exclude each other: beauty is identified with delicacy and harmony and the sublime with vastness, obscurity, and a capacity to inspire terror. The beautiful is aesthetically pleasing while the sublime has the power to compel or destroy one. Only the strongest emotions like horror or pain can produce the feeling of the sublime: “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling [...]” (Burke 1.7.). He also points out that “[...] terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke 2.2).

Burke also recognizes ugliness as something instigating strong emotions but potentially leading to a positive experience.

As mentioned above, already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the Age of Sensibility, the mountain experience was oftentimes associated with the experience of the sublime that could be strengthened or brought about through ‘walking between life and death.’ The feelings of fear, pain, and danger are, according to Edmund Burke and Thomas Gray, central to the sublime, as they intensify the emotions. In a letter to his mother, Thomas Gray describes the scenery on his way to the Grand Chartreuse monastery:

It is six miles to the top; the road runs winding up it, commonly not six feet broad; on the one hand is the rock, with woods or pine-trees hanging overhead; on the other, a monstrous precipice, almost perpendicular, at the bottom of

which rolls a torrent, that sometimes is tumbling among the fragments of stone that have fallen from on high, and sometimes precipitating itself down vast descents with a noise like thunder, which is made still greater by the echo from the mountains on each side, concurs to form one of the most solemn, the most romantic, and the most astonishing scenes I ever beheld. Add to this the strange views made by the crags and cliffs on the other hand, the cascades that in many places throw themselves from the very summit down into the vale and the river below. (Tovey 38-39)

As Hugo G. Walter has pointed out, Gray's perception of ascending a mountain as the fragile edge of life and death anticipates the mountain experience of W. Wordsworth, M. Arnold and James Hilton (Walter 10). Yet the sublime is not always born out of something that excites the feelings of danger, pain, or horror. For instance, Richard Payne Knight saw the source of the sublime in the realization of the self as a part of infinity, and the expansion of the mind was essential for the experience of sublimity (see 363). Admiration of infinity was another shade of the sublime.

Immanuel Kant's vision of the sublime prepared the way for the romantic aspiration derived from the mountainous landscape. Whereas flowers and the like inspire admiration and the sense of the beautiful, in his concept, vicious storms or mountain peaks could instigate the feeling of the sublime, which is enjoyment with horror (see Kant 45-51). Thus for Kant, the sublime was a response of reason to the idea of boundlessness, infinity, excess. Seen from such perspectives, mountains were a source of the sublime, although they were still at times regarded in the paradigm of Addison and Hakewill's earlier views that mountains were blemishes on the Earth's surface and the signs of its decay (see above). The image of the mountains changed gradually due to the evolution of their perception as objects potentially bringing aesthetic delight.

Nevertheless, even well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century people who took pleasure in scaling mountains were regarded as possessed, mentally ill. For example, John Murray's *Handbook for Travelers in Switzerland*, "warned against such follies as mountain climbing, charging that those who had already climbed Mont Blanc 'were of diseased mind'" (Roth 26). Charles Dickens and John Ruskin derided the sport of mountain climbing as somewhat dehumanizing. In his book *Sesame and Lilies* Ruskin wrote:

The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear garden, which you set yourselves to climb, and slide down again, with shrieks of delight. When you are past shrieking, having no human articulate voice to say you are glad with, you fill the quietude of the valleys with gunpowder blasts, and rush home, red with cutaneous eruption of

conceit, and voluble with convulsive hiccough of self-satisfaction. (Ruskin 1.3.35.4)

Thus, it will be legitimate to generalize that to admire mountains from a distance, and especially express the admiration in one's writing, was a virtue, whereas to try and see the subject of admiration from up close was considered a folly. In such terms Romanticism was the period of 'distant love' and beautiful poetry. But the shift in the appreciation of the mountains had already occurred and the beauty of the mountains began to be recognised at the late 17<sup>th</sup> and the early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In her research, Marjorie H. Nicolson points out that in the mid- and late 18<sup>th</sup> century the perception of mountains in literature went through a certain transformation, as in former times mountains had been predominantly presented as places of gloom and described in conventional terms. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the Romantic period of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries mountains acquired an idealised and romanticized perception, thus transforming the notion of gloom into that of glory.

One of the people who greatly contributed to the change of the attitude towards the mountains through his mountaineering experiences which found expression in his poetic works was William Wordsworth. He contemplates the topic of mountains in his "Tintern Abbey" (1798). Wordsworth speaks of the significance of the "steep and lofty cliffs" (5) which are the bridge between the earth and the sky, and evoke profound thoughts. Wordsworth's persona also experiences the sense of the sublime at the sight of nature's magnificence and boundlessness:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (93-102)

But "the motion and the spirit which the persona senses as the source of nature's creative energy and sublimity is a diastolic spatiality that encompasses not only sky, earth, and water, but also the mind of man" (Walter 16-17). For Wordsworth the experience of being a part of the universe and grandeur was essential in achieving the

feeling of the sublime. When his persona in *The Prelude*<sup>5</sup> sees the boundless horizons from the top of Snowdon, his mind expands and he “affirms the significance of infinity to inspire his aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual development while at the same time asserting that he has the capacity to participate in a sense of infinity, even in the shaping of infinity, by his communicating with past, present, and future generations” (Walter 11), “Age after age, till Time shall be no more” (6.111).

There I beheld the emblem of a mind  
That feeds upon infinity, that broods  
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear  
Its voices issuing forth to silent light  
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained  
By recognitions of transcendent power,  
In sense conducting to ideal form,  
In soul of more than mortal privilege. (6.70-77)

This sense of vastness, infinity and grandeur of the universe surfaces again and is intensified through personal experience, where the idea of a special interrelation between nature and the artist is developed.<sup>6</sup>

Episodes in Book IV and Book VI of *The Prelude* foreshadow, at least partially, the mountain vision in Book XIV. A long ascent and the landscape that complements it are described as the things that contribute to the sense of tranquillity or intense fascination. The same aspects surface in the Mt. Snowdon vision in Book XIV, where the mountain possesses an aura of majesty. The summit of Mont Blanc, which similarly inspired P. B. Shelley’s admiration voiced in his “Mont Blanc,” is described as another noteworthy and salient place where divine presence is sensed:

That very day,  
From a bare ridge we also first beheld  
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved  
To have a soulless image on the eye  
That had usurped upon a living thought  
That never more could be. The wondrous Vale  
Of Chamouny stretched far below, and soon  
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice,  
A motionless array of mighty waves,  
Five rivers broad and vast, made rich amends,  
And reconciled us to realities. (1.523-533)

---

<sup>5</sup> The first version consisting of two parts was created in 1799; the second version consisting of 13 books dates back to 1807 (found and printed by Ernest deSélincourt in 1926); the third version in 14 books appeared in 1850, shortly after Wordsworth’s death.

<sup>6</sup> The vision of the universe as a majestic cosmos is continued in the twentieth century in such works as James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1933).

Repeatedly, cliffs and peaks are seen as inspiring a sense of boundlessness, awakening a creative and powerful mind, and enriching the soul. The persona listens to the mountain winds and torrents and hears the voice of the Superior Power, of Eternity, and sees the unity of things. Majestic views lead to the experience of the sublime, but Wordsworth's persona is more mesmerized by the magnitude of God's creation, and is granted a look at the sites that inspire both admiration and fear:

[...] the stream, ere noon-day magnified  
 Into a lordly river, broad and deep,  
 Dimpling along in silent majesty,  
 With mountains for its neighbours, and in view  
 Of distant mountains and their snowy tops. (6.650-654)

Filled all the woods: the cry of unknown birds;  
 The mountains more by blackness visible  
 And their own size, than any outward light;  
 The breathless wilderness of clouds. (6.713-716)

Wordsworth writes on the capacity of mountains, wild torrents and precipices to make the human spirit expand. The poet praises the shepherd who becomes a part of nature as well as "the capacity of the openness of space to reinforce the sense of freedom of the shepherd" (Walter 41). Thus Wordsworth expresses the darkening mood of the industrial urbanized society and hints at a longing for a pastoral simplicity of life. He sees the journey to the mountains in terms of the quest for the magic mountain, "a quest for a profoundly tranquil space beyond the atmosphere of terror and violence of such events as the French Revolution and beyond the social unrest in England, while at the same time preserving the humanitarian dimension of the revolutionary spirit" (Walter 44).

In Book XIV Wordsworth's persona is granted a grand vision on Mt. Snowdon, where the sight of moonlight, hundreds of hills at his feet, the roar of torrents and streams create "a moment of extraordinary sensory vitality" (Walter 49) and suggest the presence of the majestic intellect:

Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams  
 Innumerable, roaring with one voice!  
 Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,  
 For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens. (59-62)

The power of nature, the proud beauty of the white peaks, freedom and intensity of the mountain winds also excited the imagination of Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon Byron, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In Byron's *Manfred* the mountains are presented

as the dwellings of super-human beings, “spirits of the unbounded Universe” (1.1.31) and as supernatural creatures themselves, majestic but possessing a frightening power:

Mont Blanc is the monarch of mountains  
 They crown'd him long ago  
 On a throne of rocks, in a robe of clouds,  
 With a diadem of snow.  
 Around his waist are forests braced,  
 The Avalanche in his hand. (1.1.62-67)

Manfred, a mortal who longs for but is denied oblivion, seeks his death. On the Mountain of the Jungfrau, sitting at a height which has baffled the best mountaineers, not only the Chamois hunters, he pleads with the mountains possessing infinite powers to send the avalanches and the toppling crags of ice to crush him but the elements are deaf to his prayers.

Mont Blanc inspired awe in Coleridge and triggered the feeling of the sublime and expansion of the soul under the influence of grandeur described in his “Hymn Before Sunrise”:

Thou [Mont Blanc], the meanwhile, was blending with my Thought,  
 Yea, with my Life and Life's own secret joy;  
 Till the dilating Soul, enrapt, transfused,  
 Into the mighty vision passing - there  
 As in her natural form, swelled to Vast Heaven! (20-23)

In his “Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni” (1802) Coleridge praises God for the sublime marvel of the landscape. P. B. Shelley expresses similar emotions in his “Mont Blanc.” But unlike Wordsworth's persona, Shelley's protagonist views the mountainous scenery from the side and lets his mind wander and experience the unseen grandeur. He sees the mountain from the lower reaches and imagines the storms that are raging somewhere up there. The persona is thrilled by the pictures that his mind draws for him, by the freedom and strength of the mountainous winds, the boundlessness of the sky, the white peaks and steep and frightening rocks seen only from afar.

The protagonist is overwhelmed by the realization that everything is an integral part of the universe: “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves” (1-2). He is mesmerized by the grandeur and power of nature. The feeling of the sublime is awakened by the thought of endless horizons, of eternity, and is inspired by Mont Blanc as the embodiment of magnificence and immortality. And as the persona imagines the strength and persistence of unseen winds, or the beauty of remote waterfalls, he tries to understand the relation between Nature, the Divine Powers and the human mind:

[...] and when I gaze on thee  
 I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
 To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
 My own, my human mind, which passively  
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
 Holding an unremitting interchange  
 With the clear universe of things around. (34-40)

Then, the flight of mind takes the persona to the upper reaches of Mont Blanc, prominent by their unearthly shapes, beautiful but equally menacing with their infinite powers peacefully asleep:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,  
 Mont Blanc appears, – still, snowy, and serene –  
 Its subject mountains their unearthly forms  
 Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between  
 Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,  
 Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread  
 And wind among the accumulated steeps. (60-66)

Yet despite the admiration of the mountainous scenery, Shelley's adjective "unearthly" provides ambiguous references to both the "heavenly" and "hellish" origins of the mountain, where the mountain's shape is attributed to the work of a daemon with a bow to the 17<sup>th</sup> century belief that mountains were nothing but warts on the surface of the Earth caused by the Flood:

... how hideously,  
 Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,  
 Ghastly, and scarred, and riven. – Is this the scene  
 Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young  
 Ruin? Were these their toys? or did the sea  
 Of fire, envelope once this silent snow? (69-74)

There is a belief that the mountain itself can dispel the doubts as to its origin, divine or evil, yet the mountain will share its secrets only with those able to hear the mountain's voice resonating inside them:

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
 By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
 Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (80-83)

Mont Blanc inspires fear and awe and becomes a majestic symbol of immortality and divine powers as opposed to the human, very fragile and transient world, the symbol through which an insight into eternity is granted:

All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
 Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.



Power dwells apart in its tranquillity  
 Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
 And this, the naked countenance of earth,  
 On which I gaze, even these primaeval mountains  
 Teach the adverting mind. (94-100)

The mountain becomes the creative and the destructive agent of the supreme presence:  
 “Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: - the power is there / The still and solemn power of  
 many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death” (127-129).

It is interesting to note that it is with a certain disdain that an Italian philosopher and mountaineer of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Julius Evola writes about the romantic, purely lyrical view of the mountain and calls this type of perception “the world of literary rhetoric and poetry of the worst kind that consists of bourgeois sentimentalism and conventional and stereotypical idealism” (Evola 18). He argues that such a “vision” is the result of the lack of immediate and direct experience in the mountains and perception of them only as a distant and picturesque part of a landscape. “It is now seen as the residue of nineteenth-century romanticism and as the compensation of a bourgeois generation that only yearned for the snowy peaks through easy verbal enthusiasm and for common places through verbal lyricism” (Evola 18).

To contrast Nicolson’s presentation of the mountain experience in literature, Hugo G. Walter singles out another type of mountain experience, “the quest for the magic mountain” (1):

The magic mountain, typically an environment aesthetically and intellectually distinct and physically isolated from the material world of everyday reality, is a threshold realm of life and death, and the interface of life and death, time and eternity, where the protagonist goes to achieve an epiphanic moment of awareness, to revitalize himself, and to develop a sense of time and space. (1)

Whereas this “quest for the magic mountain” has at times nothing to do with physical mountains, it is of some relevance to the topic under discussion, as in many instances the quest for the magic mountain is done in the actual mountains, which again strengthens the belief that the combination of physical challenges, a threat to life and the grandeur of the mountains, is a powerful impetus for creative impulses and the feeling of the sublime. Thus, the quest for the magic mountain is an experience of intensely felt creative vitality at the threshold of life and death during which the protagonist of the mountain experience is inspired to develop a distinctive sense or philosophy of time and space which is intimately related to his self-revitalization, and to his epiphanic moment

of awareness: “[t]he protagonist in the magic mountain experience may try to conquer time, to change it, to reshape it, to eliminate it, to measure it, to mask it, or even to coexist in a complementary relation with it. He may try to expand space, to enclose it, to transform it, or even to reaffirm or redefine himself through it” (Walter 1-2).

The search for such experience in nature, and oftentimes in the mountains, seems to be a common denominator for works of many writers and poets throughout the centuries. But unlike Wordsworth’s Romantic concept of the relationship between the artist and mountains/nature, Matthew Arnold and James Hilton voiced a darker, post-Romantic vision of this interrelation.

Wordsworth’s tranquillity found in the mountains contrasts with Arnold’s tranquillity which bears more resemblance to a withdrawal. In many cases it was a reaction to the anguishes, isolation and alienation of Victorian society evoked by industrialism and commercialism as well as Arnold’s concern about the spiritual and intellectual health of contemporary England. Mountains are seen as a place of spiritual harmony and an from the world. Thus, for example, Obermann, the protagonist of Arnold’s “Stanzas in Memory of the Author of ‘Obermann’” (1849), “an aesthetically sensitive soul who achieved an emotional-spatial unity with nature and whose work reveals an inner torment beyond the appearance of out-ward calm” (Walter 61), withdraws himself “from everyday society to alpine solitudes, as a philosopher of the ‘sentimental school,’ who seeks an epistemology of ‘feeling’ and a discipline of spiritual rebirth [...]” (Honan qtd. in Walter 61). There is also an implication of the Burkean sublimity evoked by the dynamism, persistent energy and power of nature in the alpine world. Through his intense vision, Obermann feels his soul expand to encompass “Lake Lemman’s waters, far below” and “distant peaks of snow” (Arnold 121, 123). But such expansiveness of soul is, to a certain extent, impossible to Arnold’s persona, Pivert de Senancour, a French poet. He, unlike Obermann, cannot be a hermit in the mountains, though he admits that a big part of him is left behind there. The persona envies and admires Obermann for his having mountains as his home (see Arnold 129-143), thus being closer to nature, drawing spiritual strength from it, withdrawing from the materialistically oriented world, and by becoming one with nature, defying mortality.

A protagonist pictured as a solitary wanderer, a person alienated from the customary world seeking “strange truths in undiscovered lands” (Shelley, “Alastor” 77) became a prophetic symbol of such yearnings of travellers and later on mountaineers.

The vision of mountains in Arnold's poem differs from that of James Hilton's in *Lost Horizon* (1933). In Hilton's poem "the description of the mountain [...] allows for an indefinitely open spatiality" (Walter 62), whereas Arnold's presentation implies the existence of certain boundaries, the constant reminders of mortality.

In his "Empedocles on Etna" Arnold once again uses mountains as the place where a person can find integrity, vitality and spiritual liberation from a materialistic society. Yet such scenery seems hermetic and self-contained with no implication of attempts to expand it into any other sphere of existence. There is a sense of gloom present in such mountain ambience. This image recurs in other poems, for instance, in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse."

In James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* there is no gloom in the mountains, at least from Conway's point of view. Hugh Conway, the protagonist, and his companions are kidnapped and taken to the Tibetan mountains, but Conway never regrets the experience imposed on him. He perceives the journey as mind-opening and broadening his emotional and intellectual horizons, letting him breathe the freshest air ever and enjoy the most beautiful views ever seen. Shangri-La is a place of internal harmony and unity, where aesthetic and spiritual awareness is developed.

From Conway's perspective, the mountain grandeur is awe-inspiring, it contributes to the sense of timelessness and permanence. Yet Conway has no illusions regarding the destructive power of the mountain: avalanches, rock falls, storms, etc. This hidden power of nature, this seeming tranquillity of the mountainous landscape emphasise the beauty of Shangri-La. Conway feels purified by the magnificence, spaciousness and the implication of eternity in every detail of the mountains. At the same time, one of the reasons why the protagonist feels so much at home in Shangri-La, a foreign environment, is the presence of elements of Western civilization and familiar things: numerous literary texts of Western tradition, heating, etc. These aspects combined ensure Conway's emotional and spiritual growth, intelligent self-confidence and appreciation of wisdom and culture.

There is a common feature of the presentation of mountains in the works of Wordsworth, Arnold, and Hilton: mountains are oftentimes presented as seen from afar, as part of the landscape. And even if a protagonist is seen in the mountains, one can easily feel a certain lack of immediate experience in the mountains: "[p]oets describe the mountain in brilliant and exhilarating terms that lack serious content and do not

express a sincere and direct experience. The mountain man and the true mountain climber do not share in this rhetoric” (Evola 18).

At the same time, romantic poets and painters coined a powerful image of a man positioned in the world as a strong spirit, striving to reach the heights the imagination flies to: pinnacles, mountain tops; a spirit thrilled by the magnitude of space and the powers of nature. The dramatics is achieved by the discrepancy between the longings of the spirit and limitations of the body. As James Lester pointed out, mountaineering became one way to live out such an image, for those most susceptible to it (see 91).

The early poets and philosophers as well as the representatives of the romantic traditions had their role in breaking the image of the mountains as wild and evil places, in promoting their role in the experiencing of the sublime, and in encouraging their exploration. In this way, in Mikel Vause’s opinion, the mountain literature was born: “The poets and seers naturally led others after them and so the natural evolution was from valley to ridge and from ridge to face for the mountain Rambler. This evolution then produced a literature of its own: Mountain Literature” (40).

Parallel to Arnold’s tendencies of escaping the spiritual depression as a by-product of progress in Victorian England, and revealing immediate experience in the mountains, are the moods voiced by John Muir, a great naturalist, conservationist, and mountaineer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He presented such a vision in relation to the industrial development in the USA and the madness of civilization, the madness he deplored and civilization he, like many others, believed to have a malignant influence on a person. This concern is made evident in one of the instances, when, after an extended stay in the city,<sup>7</sup> Muir slipped while hiking in the mountains, which almost cost him his life. He became greatly disappointed with himself for losing his bond with nature and feeling for rocks: “‘There,’ said I, addressing my feet, to whose separate skill I had learned to trust night and day on any mountain, ‘that is what you get by intercourse with stupid town stairs, and dead pavements’” (Muir 593).

On another occasion Muir, after reliving the most exalting experience of a flood-storm in the Sierra, pitied people imprisoned by civilization who were thus denied the feeling of real excitement at the sight of nature’s might:

Arriving at the Knox House, the good people bestirred themselves, pitying my bedraggled condition as if I were some benumbed castaway snatched from the sea; while I, in turn, pitied them, and for pity proclaimed but half the exalted beauty and riches of the storm. A dire, dry clothing, and special food were

---

<sup>7</sup>Most probably he referred to his ten-month stay with the McChesney family to write his series on glaciation and mountain sculpture for the *Overland Monthly* (see Wilkins 98).

provided, all of which attentions were, I suppose, sufficiently commonplace to many, but truly novel to me. (615)

It can be rightly inferred that in those days, mountaineering was not quite so generally appreciated as it is nowadays. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while mountaineering is widely accepted as a respectable activity (nowadays in some cases it can be regarded as a profession), the majority still treats mountaineering and mountaineers with some reservations. For instance, mountaineering (not without reason, it seems) is oftentimes seen as an addiction, when one can never get enough of climbing and of trophy peaks. Justly, this activity was seen as a drug already in the early days of mountaineering and even in the Victorian era, the beginning of which saw the golden age of alpinism,<sup>8</sup> Leslie Stephen<sup>9</sup> wrote about his mountaineering “relapses” with a distinct feeling of guilt mixed with pleasure. He described this return to mountain climbing as losing “the path of virtue” (183), as a fall equal to that of Adam (191). Moreover after failing in his good resolution to quit mountain climbing (see 182) Leslie Stephen could not get enough of the mountains:

[...] the constant views of Mont Blanc from various heights and in various directions disturbed my peace of mind; and the irritation produced by useless guides made me long for an expedition more after the old fashion. I groaned at the ineffectual nibblings at second-rate peaks, and I longed inexpressibly to be once more assaulting with an Anderegg or a Lauener one of the true race of giants that looked so invitingly near. (188-189)

The same relapses of ‘mountaineering addiction’ are mentioned by prominent American climbing writers Jim Wickwire, Jon Krakauer, Jeff Long, Greg Childs, to name but a few.

Yet as Stephen grew older his attitude to the drug of mountaineering became rather ambiguous. On the one hand, he complained that the Alps had become too mundane and too easily accessible to tourists and longed for longer, more challenging and, probably, more dangerous climbs. But on the other hand, he did not approve of William Martin Conway’s<sup>10</sup> admiration of such a remote and dangerous region as the Himalayas. Stephen believed that climbing in the Himalayas could have some attraction but doubted that it could be in any way superior to the analogous activity in the Alps. He also dismissed Conway’s claim that the Himalayas could be more beautiful, though

---

<sup>8</sup> The Golden age of alpinism was the period during which many major Alpine peaks were climbed for the first time (between the first ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854 and the ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865).

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Stephen was the father of Virginia Woolf.

<sup>10</sup> Sir William Martin Conway was the 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Conway of Allington, an English art critic, politician and mountaineer, a member of the Alpine Club from 1877 onwards, president from 1902 to 1904.

speaking about the Alps he regretted that “we rushed with delight into that enchanted land; climbed peaks and passes; made proselytes in every direction to the new creed; and ended, alas! by rubbing off the bloom of early romance, and laying the whole country open to the incursions of the ordinary tourist” (204).

Along with the regret at the desecration of the Alps Stephen does not understand Conway’s admiration of the Himalayas because they definitely lack signs of civilization:

[...] they [the Himalayas] want to have picturesque villages and church spires in their valleys; to have zigzag paths traced up their sides by the feet of succeeding generations; to have chalets built on the pastures, and terraced fields creeping up their sides; to be everywhere, in short, made into the framework of a congenial human society. (210)

Stephen does not like the thought that a journey to the Himalayas takes so much time and energy and is by far not the enterprise “accessible to the tired barrister or the university don in his vacation” (209). Despite his admiration for the Alpine scenery Stephen dismisses the idea about “hearts beating more quickly in pure nature”. He believes that “it is a delusion to suppose that the mind can permanently take pleasure in the absolute negation of human sympathy, in regions in which you are not only unelbowed by peer or player, but in conditions positively hostile to the human race” (210). For Stephen the best scenery is that one “properly aired,” “tamed and softened by the labours of [his] fellows, or at least standing out in harmonious contrast to human works” (210-211). Stephen supposes that for Conway’s party the Karakoram mountains, “these huge, frigid images of death and stagnation were a little too overpowering, and required the stirring of some associations with the land of the living” (211), whereas the Alps are “the very cream of mountaineering ecstasy” (206). He goes on to say that “Mont Blanc is noble between Chamonix and Courmayer; but K2, vaguely standing in the wilderness, in a dim region between three distant empires, would, I suspect, suggest the *ominous* and the *monstrous*, and even the *sublimity* would pass into the horrible” [emphasis added] (211).

An attitude consonant, to a certain extent, with that of Wordsworth’s and Shelley’s and contrasting with that of Stephen’s was expressed by John Muir, who used “to distrust the vaunted blessings of civilization. He suspected that such blessings were largely a delusion and that urban culture was shot through with sickness, or as he would declare in a defensively exaggerated way after a later and longer sojourn in the cities, ‘There is not a perfectly sane man in San Francisco’” (Wilkins 92).

Muir also reacted against Ruskin's perception of the mountains as dark, monstrous and dehumanizing. He called Ruskin's concept of mountain gloom as "bogle humbug" and wrote about Ruskin's "lack of faith in the Scriptures of Nature" and his limited knowledge of these Scriptures of Nature (see Wilkins 94). Mountains and nature were Muir's dearest friends, the best revelations of God. He wrote: "all the rocks seemed talkative, and more lovable than ever. They are dear friends, and have warm blood gushing through their granite flesh; and I love them with a love intensified by long and close companionship" (Muir 592). For Muir, mountains were the embodiment of the divine but they also were living creatures capable of reciprocal feelings, whose "faces shone with responsive love" (597).

Muir personified mountains and saw them as perfection, beauty rich with waterfalls, glaciers, and rocks, the very wealth that brought the feeling of the sublime (see Muir 596). After one of his trips to the mountains Muir wrote: "All this big mountain-bread for one day! One of the rich, ripe days that enlarge one's life" (597).

Overall, literature reveals numerous instances of mountains playing a crucial role in the lives of individuals. Through the ways that mountains are presented in literature one can also see the attitude towards mountains and mountain climbing. The response to the mountains falls more or less into two or three clearly cut categories:

- the ardent admiration of mountaineering as a recreation activity only (Leslie Stephen);
- disapproval of the activity as such for being silly and dangerous by its nature (John Murray, John Ruskin, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Charles Dickens);
- the growth of interest in exploring and climbing in remote and, oftentimes, frightening regions (Sir William Martin Conway, Charles Granville Bruce, George Mallory and Andy Irving, Eric Shipton, Bill Tilman, Sir Edmund Hillary and Charles Houston, etc.).

Turning again to Nicolson's paradigm of "mountain gloom and mountain glory" it is legitimate to say that Westerners seem to have a more negative perception of the mountains as compared to that of the people in Asia. A short survey of some mountain names in the Alps and the Himalayas will yield some insight. Take, for instance, the mountains in the vicinity of Mont Blanc called Mount Mallet and Mount Maudit, the possible equivalents being 'Mount Hell' and 'Mount Purgatory' (see Stephen 191), or

the Eiger (Ogre)<sup>11</sup> in Switzerland and another Ogre in the Karakoram range (the name was given by one of the first British mountaineers in those regions, Sir William Martin Conway), etc. At the same time the mountains in the East and in Asia possess purer, or even ‘heavenly’ names, for example, the Himalayas are translated from Sanskrit as ‘the seat of the snows’, Chomolungma – ‘goddess, mother of the world’/Sagarmatha – ‘goddess of the sky’ (the Tibetan and Nepalese variants for Mount Everest respectively), or Kanchenjunga – ‘five treasures of the great snow.’ The very name of the region, the Himalaya, is referred to in ancient Buddhist scriptures as the ‘storehouse of snow,’ Masherbrum seems to mean ‘queen/lady mountain,’ Gasherbrum IV most likely means ‘beautiful mountain’ or ‘shining wall’ (Curran 29), the Cook Mountains in Antarctica are more famous by the name ‘the Mountains of Madness’ (named by Westerners), etc.

Westerners appear to have a more negative attitude towards the mountains than people of the Orient. In Asia and in the Orient mountains are mostly revered and admired from aside rather than climbed, because they have always been regarded as awe-inspiring but sacred. Thus the names reflect the admiration of nature’s grandeur. For the Westerners mountains are awe-inspiring, too, but in a different, a belligerent way. Mountains are oftentimes seen as adversaries to be confronted and conquered, and once the victory is won the victor has the right to exercise control over the fallen foe and impose a name on it. Names are also the implication of the greatness of victories, for, the scarier the enemy, the greater the victory. This leads to such names like the Devils Thumb (a mountain in Alaska), and the surroundings of the mountain are called the Witches Cauldron. Jon Krakauer brings some examples of the Western naming skill in ice climbing, which is by and large an extension of mountaineering/climbing and can refer to mountains/rocks:

Special prestige, obviously, is attracted to making first ascents. Not only are those who first subdue a given waterfall immortalized in *The Book*, but they earn the right to name the cascade as they see fit. A quick glance through *The Book*’s pages reveals that the local taste in waterfall names runs to such creative handles as Killer Death Fang Falls, Deo Gratias, Never Again, Necromancer, Thrash & Bash, Too Loose Lautrec, No Way Jose, Dire Straits, and Marginal Desperation. A number of the appellations, not fit to print, are inspired by bodily functions and adolescent sexual fixations, reflecting the arrested development of the typical ice climber. (Krakauer, *Eiger Dreams* 36)

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf., Fr. “maudit”= En. “goddamn,” “accursed”; the Eiger is also known as Ogre, although the etymology of the word “eiger” is not quite clear.



Up to almost the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and still in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mountains were viewed from afar, they were usually presented in a somewhat unreal light – either in a lyrical key as a symbol of grandeur and beauty, or in a darker way, as mysterious and dangerous places. And only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the mountains themselves become a popular subject matter, not only a setting for action. Naturally such an evolution of travel literature was prompted by some recent changes in the focus of explorers and travellers and by the cultural transformations.

## **The History of Mountaineering**

For the purpose of this paper only an outline of the history of mountaineering is possible. Mountaineering started as an off-spring of travel and exploration (though it later also turned into an attempt to escape the madness of the industrialized world), and was prompted by the very factors that had once given birth to travel, that is, material, geo-political and social gain (e.g., to leave an imprint on the history of humanity). In the early days of mountaineering the first summit attempts were often prompted by the desire to explore, “mountain climbing was thus seen as an adjunct of scientific endeavour, but this state of affairs did not last very long” (Roth 24). Englishmen were among the most ardent explorers of the heights both in the Alps and the Himalayas, the fact being mostly caused by the country’s geographical position and its imperial politics, especially regarding non-European locations.

Speaking about the cultural context of climbing, James Lester, a retired psychologist who has done research in the subject area of mountaineering and mountaineers, including field studies in the 1960s, emphasises that there was

[...] the parallel between the romantic consciousness, as it developed and spread through European culture in the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the ethos and meanings of climbing as it has evolved. Granted, one explanation could be that the writings of climbers are bound to express the prevailing cultural assumptions of their times, and some might argue that this means those writings tell us nothing about true or underlying meanings. I would argue that cultural assumptions, not necessarily at all conscious, actually shape actions and motivations, and that without the culturally shared outlook of romanticism, which is still alive today, climbers would have had no way of making themselves intelligible to themselves or to others. The fact that alpinism arose in the context of European culture just when romanticism was permeating it, and that climbing for its own sake was simply nonexistent in other cultures of the world until it spread there as part of the spread of Western modernity, seems to me a highly persuasive argument. (Lester 89)

The first historical ascent of a mountain for the sake of itself was in 1492 “when King Charles VII of France ordered his court chamberlain, the lord of Dompjulian and Beaupré, one Antoine de Ville, to have the 6,900-foot Mount Aiguille, outside Grenoble, climbed just to see what the top of that soaring, prow-shaped, flat-topped mountain was like” (Roth 25).

But as a sport, the idea of climbing mountains is relatively new – not much older than 200 years. Interestingly enough the acts of mountaineering were instigated by a material gain: the Genovese scholar and the inveterate Alpine traveller, Horace-

Benedict de Saussure, offered a reward to anyone who reached the summit of Mont Blanc (Vause 9). It was first climbed in 1786 by two young men from nearby Chamonix, Jacques Balmat and Michel Paccard. Thus they are credited with the invention of the sport, though mountain guides were paid to lead tourists on mountain hikes or travellers through mountain passes long before that. The ascent was repeated the following year by Horace-Benedict de Saussure himself. 1838 saw the second woman ascent of Mont Blanc, by Mme d'Angeville, who was widely acknowledged as a serious alpinist. The first woman ascent was made in 1808 by an 18-year-old Chamonix maidservant, Marie Paradis, who later used the fact to advertise her tearoom (Roth 24). But, as Arthur Roth asserts, "to the English must go the credit for having invented the *sport* of Alpine climbing" (Roth 25), though they sometimes were accompanied by 1-2 guides each and even a score of porters. But despite the early attempts,

[t]he Golden Age of Mountaineering is generally considered to have started in 1856 with the publication of Alfred Wills's book *Wanderings Among the High Alps*, a work that details a number of his climbs, including the ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854. Then too, it was in 1856 that the British Alpine Club was founded; the British *Alpine Journal*, the world's first periodical devoted to mountain climbing, started publication in 1863. And in 1865 that most idealized, most romantic of all Alpine peaks – the Matterhorn – was climbed by Whymper. (Roth 26)

After the English had more or less fully explored the mountains of the British Islands, they more and more frequently turned their attention to the Alps. In 1858 Charles Barrington, an Irishman, was the first person to ascend the Eiger (the west flank, an easy route), this route was repeated by his brother, Richard, in 1876), in 1864 a Miss Lucy Walker of Liverpool, made the 4<sup>th</sup> ascent of the Eiger, and the first by a woman. "During the 1880s an English aristocrat, Sir Peter Campbell, who had been blind since boyhood, also climbed the west flank of the Eiger, as well as Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn" (Roth 31). Overall, mountaineering history knows many 'unusual' climbing episodes. A reference to one of them is included in Jon Krakauer's essay about Chamonix: "By 1876, 795 men and women had reached the top of Mont Blanc, among them an Englishman named Albert Smith who passed out drunk on the summit after he and his companions put away ninety-six bottles of wine, champagne, and cognac in the course of their ascent" (Krakauer, *Eiger Dreams* 88).

This wave of high interest in mountainous recreation started to rob the climbs of their charm and aura, as well as of the challenges the peaks posed. During the same

period new routes on the Eiger were scaled. Until the 1920s north faces were regarded as too dangerous to even consider the climb. But one by one they too yielded to the will and skill of men: the Eigernordwand (or as it was called ‘the Mordwand’ – ‘the Killer Wall’), the last great Alpine problem, was finally climbed in 1938.

A keener interest in mountains and mountaineering was triggered not only by exploration impulses but by a number of other social, political and economic processes in Europe and the USA from about the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards (the industrial revolution). In Victorian England, despite a seeming optimism, there existed a sense of anxiety and insecurity of the future brought about by various events between 1820 and 1870: cholera epidemics in 1832 and 1848-49; social unrests in 1850 and 1866, and the threat of foreign invasion in the 1850s, from Napoleon III (see House 95). Humphry House in his essay “The Mood of Doubt” goes on to point out that the high tempo of life and worsening of both the political and economic situation “caused, both in the lives of individuals and in the political life of the nation, further difficulties and also discomfort, doubt, and hysterical impatience leading almost to despair” (95-96). Under such circumstances, mountains started to be seen as the last outposts of the wilderness and simplicity of life in nature for those tired of civilization (the phenomenon that J. Evola termed escapism, and the diminishing/negative side of naturalism).

In the USA in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there were a number of social, industrial, religious and scientific changes that became very significant factors for prompting people to start appreciating the wilderness. Due to the rapid taming of the Wild West, frontier territories almost ceased to exist in the US by the end of the century as shown in the census of 1890, analysed by the Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian who popularized the frontier (Wilkins xviii). At the same time urbanization was developing rapidly, the tempo of life was picking up speed, the overcrowding of cities combined with the growing dissatisfaction with civilization became more and more industry-dependent and consumerism-oriented. Life was becoming too hazardous and complicated with too much information to digest.

These aspects became a precondition for the re-assessment of the wilderness that had previously been deplored and feared, and for the emergence of nostalgia as a feature of American life: the rapidly vanishing wilderness and frontier territories were being

idealized for their simplicity, even primitivism as well as for their role in “the pioneers’ struggle to conquer the frontier [that] had led to the development of such romantic and desirably American virtues as independence, manliness, individualism, confidence in the common man, and even the impetus toward democracy” (Wilkins xviii).

Thus the wilderness started to be worshipped with the resulting desire to preserve it. Such steps were also facilitated by “nature literature” in the USA, the most famous representatives being Henry David Thoreau,<sup>12</sup> John Burroughs, and John Muir, who pleaded for wilderness preservation and the establishment of national parks (see Wilkins xxi). Numerous national parks started to emerge, mostly in the West, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drawing attention of people from all over the country. Travel was facilitated by a growing number of wagon- and rail-roads making tourism a superb medium of wilderness popularization. This led to “a contemporary boom in sports and other health-promoting activities such as cycling, hiking, and camping out” (Wilkins xxvi), with John Muir as one of the most ardent promoters of such activities. It was rather natural that mountains were immediately seen as the essence of wilderness possessing healing power: “[c]limb the mountains and get their good tidings. ... Nature’s peace will flow into you as the sunshine into the trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away like autumn leaves” (qtd. in Wilkins xxvii).

Along with the mountaineering attempts in Europe and the USA a lot of efforts were made to explore and scale the snowy peaks of distant regions: the Himalayas and the Karakoram, primarily. At the time of the first expeditions to Central Asia, about 150 years ago, these regions seemed very remote and mysterious. As always, people’s first motivation was connected with monetary gain: to find new trade routes across the vast mountain barrier between the Indian sub-continent and the Central Asian plateau. The knowledge about what was there beyond the ranges of mountains was, in this respect, probably of more importance than the precise dimensions of the mountains in the Himalaya and the Karakoram ranges. But this state of things changed in no time. The Himalayas belonged to the objects strategically important for the British military. The mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was the time of big stakes in British-Russian relations regarding power and influence in Central Asia. Under such circumstances any scraps of knowledge about the region and about possible mountain passes could not be overestimated.

---

<sup>12</sup> *A Walk to Wachusett* (1842), *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), *Walden* (1854).

One of the best known explorers of the region at that time was Francis Younghusband, a British Dragoon Guards officer, who travelled widely through the Karakoram on his reconnaissance trips. Later on “Younghusband’s career was to take him all over the Himalaya – notably in 1903 when he led the ill-advised mission to Lhasa – and until his death in 1942 aged seventy-eight he was a keen follower of Himalayan climbing, and instrument in setting up the early Everest expeditions” (Curran 41).

One of the early Karakoram explorers was Sir Martin Conway, who organized one of the first recognizable *mountaineering* expeditions, in 1892, later described in his *Climbing and Exploring in the Karakoram Himalaya*. Sir Martin Conway was a professor at Liverpool University, a member of the Alpine Club and later its president. Leslie Stephen, an older mountaineer and a member of the Alpine Club himself, criticised Conway for going on a quest for challenges and beauty to the end of the world, instead of enjoying the civilized beauty of the Alps (see above). Stephen’s response to Conway’s extreme mountaineering brings into the open the ever existent tension between different generations of mountaineers: the older ones can never understand why there is such a love of danger and the extreme. Notably, the mountaineers following immediately in Conway’s steps were looked down upon by Conway himself for their too keen interest in risk:

Conway epitomised the romantic Victorian explorer-mountaineer. A genuine lover of mountains and of mountain travel, Conway stood for what was already coming to be seen as the traditional wing of the Alpine Club, and one that was at odds with a newer breed of climbers like Alfred Mummery and Oscar Eckenstein who were more interested in seeking out difficulty for its own sake. (Curran 44)

The expedition lasted for almost a year, from February 1892 to December 1893, and included Lieutenant C. G. Bruce of the Fifth Gurkha Rifles, who later led two of the early British Everest expeditions (see below). Nowadays Conway is credited not so much for achievements in the sphere of climbing as in providing an example of what became the prototype of the big 20<sup>th</sup> century expeditions.

1902 was the year of the first recorded expedition with climbing a mountain as the priority goal (see Curran 55). It was the English expedition organized by Oscar Eckenstein (an unconventional mountaineer of those times who contributed largely to the techniques of climbing) and Aleister Crowley (an eccentric cult figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a rather good but very haphazard climber who despised guides, pitons and fixed ropes). Yet Crowley was granted an insight into a number of progressive aspects of mountaineering: he criticised the siege method of climbing (characterized by setting a

line of intermediary camps, and ferrying loads from lower camps to higher ones. This method of ascent demands much time, equipment and big groups of people) in favour of the style later developed by Eric Shipton, then by Reinhold Messner and others now known as the Alpine style (characterized by a quick push to the summit of the mountain carrying only the vitally necessary equipment).

The Americans were eager to see the big mountains as well. In 1898 an eccentric middle-aged couple, Dr. William Hunter Workman and Fanny Bullock Workman, while on a bicycle tour of India decided to see the Himalaya. They had no mountaineer experience yet they somehow managed to scale a few minor peaks around Snow Lake, the Hispar and the Biafo Glaciers (see Curran 65). In their extensive descriptions of the journeys they did not write anything unknown by that time but they contributed to the stereotypical portrait of a tourist: “[i]t is tempting to see them as the forerunners of the archetypal tourist: impatient, critical, often at odds with their porters and local inhabitants, self-important and at times unscrupulous” (Curran 65). The Workmans returned to the Himalaya and the Karakoram several times, 1912 being their last year in the region.

There were a number of other Karakoram expeditions conducted by Westerners in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet their aims were primarily to explore and map the region rather than to climb mountains. Yet the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also the time when more and more expeditions were organized for the sake of mountaineering itself. There appeared a number of innovations in techniques, equipment and attitudes: the first ten-point crampons, pitons and ice-axes were used. Expeditions of colossal proportions with hundreds of porters started to give way to smaller parties with mountaineers carrying their own loads.

The new century brought new blood and energy from the New World to the Himalaya-Karakoram regions. The Americans, having conquered the last frontier territories in the West of the USA, devoted their attention to the mountain peaks of the world. This page of mountaineering history includes such names as Bob Bates, David Breashears, Scott Fischer, Charles Houston, Jon Krakauer, Jeff Long, John Long, Fritz Wiessner (a German by origin), James Ramsey Ullman and many others.

In 1937 a small British expedition was active in the same region. The expedition included two leading explorer-mountaineers of the time, Eric Shipton and Bill Tillman, plus two surveyors of the Geographical Survey of India. Several years later Eric Shipton

made this expedition the subject of one of his books, *Blank on the Map*, which has inspired later generations of climbers, including Sir Edmund Hillary, Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker.

Along with the expeditions in the Karakoram, efforts were being made to explore the Himalaya. In 1852 Peak XV in the Himalaya ridge, in the forbidden kingdom of Nepal (Tibet and Nepal were closed to Westerners until after World War I), was calculated to be the highest peak of the world.<sup>13</sup> Initially, the peak was estimated at 29,002 feet and later corrected to 29,028 feet. In terms of the metrical system the highest mountain of the world was 8,848m, or, according to the most recent calculations, 29,035 feet or 8,850m. In 1865 Waugh, India's Surveyor General, named Peak XV 'Everest,' to honour his predecessor of 1833-43, Sir George Everest, despite the fact that the mountain had already two names: Jomolungma or Chomolungma for the Tibetans, and Sagarmatha for the Nepalese. Waugh also disregarded the naming policy that encouraged the retention of local names of the mountains. Thus the highest mountain of the world became known as Mount Everest to the Western world.

Once 'the Third Pole' of the earth was determined and the other two reached (in 1909 the North Pole by Robert Peary,<sup>14</sup> and in 1911 the South Pole by Roal Amundsen's party), it was time to see the summit of Everest, the top of the world.

The turn of the century also saw considerable advancements in mountaineering, one of the most important being Dr. Kellas' theory about acclimatization and first studies of altitude sickness and the use of bottled oxygen at high altitudes. Before 1921, Dr. Kellas had spent several years in the Himalayas conducting research and became a major asset to the Everest expedition of Mallory in 1921.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the attention of the mountaineering world was turned to the attempts to ascend Everest. Out of a number of them the most important was made by George Mallory and Andrew Irvine in 1924. It has been resonating ever since. But the mystery of that expedition still tortures the minds of many. Mallory and Irvine were last seen at what is now called the Second Step. It has been proved that they came within several hundred meters of the summit, yet the question of whether they reached the top of Everest still lingers with no chances of being ever answered. The expedition of 1924 became one of the most popular

---

<sup>13</sup> It was calculated by Radhanath Sikhdar, a Bengali working for the Great Trigonometric Survey Calcutta bureau.

<sup>14</sup> At least Robert Peary claimed to be the first person to have reached the North Pole, which was later doubted.



mountaineering myths offering numerous possibilities for speculations, many of which appear in the form of fiction.<sup>15</sup> The search for Mallory and Irvine's bodies is another fertile basis for fiction,<sup>16</sup> although Mallory's body was found in 1999. In 1953 Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay made the first documented ascent of Everest, the mountain that has become a symbol of ambition, success and exclusivity.

There seemed to be fewer and fewer mountaineering secrets and challenges left, be those the Himalaya or European mountain ridges. Climbing and mountaineering were taken up by people from all walks of life, unlike during the dawn days of the sport, when this activity had been the domain of the upper classes.

At the moment when the sources of adrenalin seem to have been reduced to a minimum, modifications of old things spring to life, like free climbing (see below). By now almost everything has been seen and done but excitement and the feeling of novelty are still highly needed in order to add zest to life. Many a time this zest, the source of adrenalin, is found in extreme sports – bungee-jumping, rock-climbing, mountaineering, big-wave surfing, paragliding, etc., sports that with time almost inevitably become addictions. Out of the list of activities, rock-climbing and mountaineering seem to make much more sense than, let us say, bungee-jumping, for in the former one has control over one's destiny to a great extent, or so it is believed.

For clarity's sake it has to be mentioned that there exists a certain difference between climbing and mountaineering, though in some cases the line is blurred, and for our literary purposes the difference will not be very significant. Climbing has more to do with a 'warm rock,' so to say, it is more stationary with shorter but technically more challenging routes and rarely more than two to four climbers are involved in it at the same time. Mountaineering, on the other hand, combines climbing and hard-core hiking, walks over glaciers, in snow and through ice-falls. This activity can engage individuals, small groups or expeditions involving sometimes up to 25-30 climbers, plus aiding personnel. Over the last decades a new type of climbing, free climbing, has emerged (the upward progress by using only natural features of the rock, no aiding involved). It is a relatively new type of climbing, until recently simply unimaginable on most routes.

---

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Guy Waterman, "The Bronx Plumber" (Salked, Smith 271-79). Guy Waterman, together with his wife Laura, was a prodigious climber and an activist for the preservation of the wilderness and the wilderness ethics. The Watermans and their three sons were deeply connected to the mountaineering scene. Unfortunately, two elder sons and Guy Waterman himself lost their lives in the mountains (at different points of time). There are speculations that at least Johnny, the second son and a prodigy climber, did not plan to come back from his last climb. The topic and Johnny Waterman's person are shortly discussed in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. Guy Waterman committed a suicide in 2000 by climbing Mount Lafayette and lying down to freeze on the summit of the mountain.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, *Mother Goddess of the World*.

Free climbing has emerged as a result of an implementation of ‘equal means’ philosophy – one has to climb with no technical support, except when needed for safety. More and more importance is being attributed not only to the fact of having climbed the route but also to the mode it is done. As Paul Piana points out, “[t]o a connoisseur of big wall climbs, only the tallest, sheerest, most monolithic faces hold any interest. Mountains like Everest and walls like The Eiger are dismissed as too easy by those who might be contenders within a modern free climbing area” (21).

But one must give credit to those who decide to ascend Everest or the Eiger, especially if one considers some factors almost unknown in climbing but inevitably causing many complications in mountaineering: altitude, the amount of gear to be carried, the length of a route and bad weather.

By the mid-1980s the attitude towards mountaineering had undergone dramatic changes: it became largely deprived of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals of camaraderie and self-denial, the aura of romanticism and the feeling of exploration, or of the aspirations of self-discipline. They gave way to the belief that anyone physically and psychologically fit with enough money could climb big mountains, thus climber motivations and attitudes began to change as well, creating a niche for a new type of climbing, adventure climbing (commercial guided expeditions with paying clients). Oftentimes such expeditions are joined by people not for the love of the mountains but to have something to boast about. And mostly their looks are turned only to the top of the world as the ultimate prize:

This obsession with Everest and the willingness for novices to take extreme risks to reach the top coincided with climbing’s increasing market status and commodification as a sport. New technologies and distribution channels provided an ever-growing supply of goods and gadgets—ultralight, ergonomically designed gear, sophisticated guidance equipment, radio communications, and climbing gyms made it possible for many more novices to try the sport, easily exchanging economic capital for cultural capital [...]. Many clients were highly successful professionals from business, medicine, and law who had made it to the top of their professions and were looking for a different venue in which to stake their claims. (Elmes, Barry 175)

Unfortunately, such desire to have climbed, rather than to climb a mountain,<sup>17</sup> a greater responsibility of the guides and the relative inadequacy of paying clients sometimes contributed to a death rate that could have been avoided by experienced climbers. Elmes and Barry also argue that “technical improvements could not counterbalance the

---

<sup>17</sup> Here one can speak about the shift in the goals and values: for many it is more important to have a summit on their “records list” than experience the process of climbing, thus they wish *to have climbed* the mountain already rather than *to have to climb* it.

regressive work-group cultures that had emerged (because of changes in client dispositions and leader roles and responsibilities) and that had made adventure-climbing teams vulnerable in a crisis” (Elmes, Barry 175).

## **Mountaineering Fiction**

Mountaineering and climbing can be described as travels, thus they inevitably find their reflection in travel writing. Until several decades ago mountaineering was predominantly the subject of non-fiction. The instances of climbing or mountaineering being presented in fiction were rather scarce and such fiction was sometimes lacking in quality (in the late 70s it was generally acknowledged that no masterpiece of mountaineering fiction had been written). For the purpose of this paper the focus will be put on fiction with mountaineers or climbers as the main characters, mountains and rocks as the main setting, and mountaineering having a significant role.

Social structure influences literature and as climbing has made its way into everyday life, so has the topic made its way into fiction. A variety of novels, plays, and short stories (written by both climbers and non-climbers) appear steadily, their plots and genres ranging widely: from drama, tragedy or epics, to crime fiction, romances and comedy; the frequently discussed themes are those of achievement, ageing and mortality, love and hatred, loyalty and betrayal; national and other stereotypes as well as the attempts to break them; the psychology of a group and that of an individual; the questions of life and death, as well as that of value systems. Yet, as Audry Salkeld and Rosie Smith point out in the Introduction to *One Step in the Clouds*, in works written by a non-climber “some element of first-hand authenticity seems lacking, or the action slips too easily into melodrama” (7). And even if the writing is very much in tune with climbing reality, it can fail to engage climbers’ appreciation due to the mere fact that it has been written by an outsider (see 7). This fact is significant because it reflects the ever-present tension between insiders and outsiders of the mountaineering world and draws attention to the issue of the ‘core’ and ‘outsiders’ in both mountaineering and mountaineering writing. Yet the matter is more complicated than it may seem at a first glance. On the one hand, the non-climbing writers do not find much recognition in the climbing circles; on the other hand, climbers themselves do not always possess the narrative skills to tell a good story. Additionally, climbers do not always seek publicity, or, oftentimes see no point in writing about their experiences and adventures, for fear of inviting ‘the crowd’ to the world that they try to protect against trespassing by this crowd. Climbers sometimes become a part of myths and such secrecy, intended or resultant from a highly valued sense of privacy, works well to sustain myths:

[...] climbing is considered by its adherents to be somehow too *sacred* to fictionalize. Its vivid real-life dramas and intense loyalties, its acts of heroism

and the all-too-frequent encounters with violent death are too precious, too poignant, too much part of some private lore and myth to become raw material of fiction. Pillaging such treasure is seen at best as exploitation or trivialization, at worst as desecrating shrines. (8)

At least it used to be this way. At the moment this state of things in mountaineering fiction is undergoing great changes. More and more climbers find writing accounts or fictionalizing their trials and adventures to be a very helpful device for meeting the ghosts, making sense of personal experiences, emotions, and losses, and coming to terms with themselves. For Joe Simpson, one of the world's famous mountaineers, writing his second book *This Game of Ghosts* "was definitely a cathartic exercise. An exorcism of the ghosts of friends [he]'d lost to the mountains" (Prichard) as he admits in the interview with Paul Prichard. Prichard, a mountaineer writer who suffered a severe head injury, wrote that "you may never be able to change or, ultimately, heal completely but you can learn to live, or die, within your shell." He also acknowledges that such healing is not an easy one and it requires much time and spiritual effort:

Over two years have passed since I had that life-changing occurrence. Some would say I am gathering up the scraps of a life torn apart by a terrible accident but I would prefer to call it progressing on life's pilgrimage. If there's one physical act that has helped me more than the interminable physiotherapy it is writing. Writing about, dissecting and studying my misadventure has aided me beyond reckoning. ...There are many others throughout history who have used the same tool as a way of coming to terms with loss or acceptance. Two obvious examples are Helen Keller with her 'Story of my Life' and Christy Brown with 'My Left Foot.' (Prichard)

Apart from the 'insider-outsider' issue there is a problem of climbing jargon. On the one hand, there is a tendency to use the jargon and leave everything at that, without any explanations. The apparent reason is the reluctance of the climbing writers to slow down the narrative. In this case the target audience of such books is mostly fellow climbers. This is a conscious move to yet again strengthen the 'core-outsider' paradigm. It can also happen unconsciously, as a result of a writer's poor narrative skills and a failure to realize that there might be somebody not familiar with the jargon. On the other hand, writers may sometimes overdo in their effort to explain the jargon and terms, thus depriving their narrative of the sense of authenticity and turning a novel into a climber's manual. Until very recently, there have been very few writers who could boast both good climber records and matching story telling skills and who could make the book reach both sides of the audience: climbers and non-climbers. Only starting around the 1980s mountaineering fiction started to gain more quality, power and recognition. This

has also been brought about by many changes in mountaineering itself. By now the list of climbing fiction writers is rather extensive and it includes, on both sides of the Atlantic, such names as Chris Bonington, Greg Child, David Craig, David Harris, John Harrison, Jeff Long, John Long, Pat and Biaba Morrow, Paul Piana, David Roberts, Doug Robinson, K. S. Robinson, James Salter, Doug Scott, Gordon Thompson, Stephen Venables, old-timers like Charlie Houston and Bob Bates, etc. Yet mountaineering fiction seems to suffer from some limitations, for only recently rather new approaches have been propagated in the climber-writer circles. For instance, Dave Cook in his lecture at one of the festivals of mountaineering literature “threw out a challenge to mountaineering literature to be more inclusive (of women, young activists, climbers from minority ethnic groups, foreign literatures), more connected to climbers' wider lives (as workers, lovers, and political, even musical creatures) and more expressively experimental in form” (Gifford).

Among other relatively new tendencies is the post-modern approach to the past or accounts of the past as another version of reality. Attention is given to the fact that no objective and thus reliable accounts can exist, but that every narrative is a subjective presentation of events. The focus is oftentimes on personal accounts (actual or fictionalized) or narratives with a very selective presentation of facts. In some cases it is the attempt to convey the impossibility to render one's experiences, to relate the feelings excited by a climb, where the objective categories (climb rating, length of the route, remoteness of the place) yield to the subjective ones (sentiments evoked by a landscape, the emotional response to possible risks, etc):

The literature of the mountains is transcendental by nature. Because language is limiting it contains the inevitably incomplete record of the climber/writer's sojourn in the ideal world, which though incomplete, still proves the reader with a vicarious account of enlightenment achieved by the climb, and a written vision of the climber's art achieved through his travels in the Earth's wild places and a record of the physical exhilaration felt by the climber fortunate enough to reach the summit. It matters not if it be a first ascent or the hundredth visit to the top, the experience is the end in itself. (Vause 11)

In the constantly growing variety of texts, forms and approaches in climbing literature there seem to exist, nonetheless, more or less universal themes, settings, characters, and the ways to present them. In the attempt to examine these, along with other aspects, a number of fictional and non-fictional texts will be analysed.

## **The Reasons for Climbing and Writing About It**

Reasons for climbing/mountaineering and writing about actual or fictional experiences are numerous and complicated, but a number of climbers and philosophers do explain this addiction to mountaineering by the contemporary tendencies of the society's development.

According to an Italian philosopher Julius Evola, mountaineering is an attempt to escape from the over-industrialized, materialistic and technology-driven society. It is one's way to personal victories: "the inner victory against the deepest forces that surface in one's consciousness during times of tension and mortal danger is a triumph in an external sense, but it is also the sign of a victory of the spirit against itself and of an inner transfiguration" (Evola 4).

Charles S. Houston, an American physician, mountaineer, high-altitude investigator and author, tries to give the answer to the eternal question "Why climb mountains?", pointing out that every mountaineer has his/her personal reasons to climb. He also contemplates his personal reasons, concluding that for him, mountaineering is the affirmation of life and the escape from the mundane. In his book *K2 – The Savage Mountain*, he writes:

How can I phrase what seems to me the most important reasons of all? It is the chance to be briefly free of the small concerns of our common lives, to strip off nonessentials, to come down to the core of life itself. Food, shelter, friends – these are the essentials, these plus faith and purpose and a deep and unrelenting determination. O great mountains all purpose is concentrated on the single job at hand, yet the summit is but a token of success, and the attempt is worthy in itself. It is for these reasons that we climb, and in climbing find something greater than accomplishment. (24)

Geoff Tabin, an acknowledged American climber and writer, speaks about the addiction to danger as one of the reasons for climbing. In his book, *Blind Corners*, he writes about climbing and overcoming the dangers related to it as a source of the feeling of being "more alive than ever before" (xi). However, he emphasises that no one is interested in risk for its own sake, but it has to be accepted as an inevitable constituent. For him and his partners, climbing is life affirmation and discovery of the 'virgin territories.' In the introduction to *Blind Corners* he points out: "I do not believe any of my deceased climbing partners lived in any way that beckoned death, but rather in a way that maximized life. The freedom of the mountains and the ability to confront the unknown is a metaphor for the freedom of the human spirit" (xi).

Additionally, Tabin stresses the same concern with the over-industrialized, materialistic and technology-driven society and sees climbing as an escape possibility. Climbing can also satisfy the need for adventure and exploration:

The satisfaction of turning blind corners, relying on my wits and skills to succeed is, to me, the essence of adventure. In our mechanized world of processed food, electric socks, in-flight entertainment, real adventures can be difficult to find. The expanding “adventure travel” industry offers exotic and sometimes strenuous trips all over the world. But they do not offer adventure. Your guide makes the decisions and ensures your safety. Pay your fee and enjoy the ride – in our litigious society, the outcome must never be left in doubt. You will see tigers and mountain peaks, but you won’t get the feeling of accomplishment and joy that comes from doing it yourself. Then again, if you don’t take a risk, you won’t get hurt. Adventure, by definition, risks failure. (1-2)

Jim Wickwire, another distinguished climbing writer, speaks about being addicted to danger. He tries to explain his motivation to climb and to work through his memories and experiences, presenting them as a memoir in his introduction to the book *Addicted to Danger*:

As I recalled my repeated promises to stop climbing and my inability to follow through – despite small children at home and the deaths of several companions – I recognized that I climbed not only for the solitude, beauty, physical exertion, or bonds of friendship I found in the mountains, but also because of an attraction to danger. This has been a sobering insight. I selected the title not to explain why others climb, but to cast light on my own motivation. (xii)



### **The Presentation of the Character of the Climber. An Outline.**

*In mountains, they say one way or another, they have found a place where one can be one's self more honestly, unguardedly, wholeheartedly, and trust others to do the same, and mountains come to represent not just a good place to spend a weekend but all that is "noble, real, unselfish, and unselfconscious in life. (Lester 93)*

In the course of the development of mountaineering literature the presentation of the character of a climber has gone through certain transformations. The first of the distinct types that have found their way onto the pages of mountaineering fiction and non-fiction is a gentleman mountaineer. In the thesis this category is represented by Eric Shipton and Sir Edmund Hillary and the accounts of their expeditions, *Upon That Mountain* and *High Adventure* as well as by the members of the Rum Doodle expedition in the fictional *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*.

The gentleman mountaineer is mostly presented as a larger-than-life figure with very few weaknesses. Dorothy Pilley, one of the outstanding women-climbers of the 1920s draws a picture of super-humans and calls such mountaineers "a race of giants – mysterious beings hardly of this world, undaunted, diamond-nerved and steel-sinewed" (Mazel 132). For the gentleman mountaineer the good of the team is the utmost priority, he is tough and always enthusiastic. If he ever experiences fear he always controls it, and never complains about his health problems, which, if mentioned, are usually rendered by means of a classic of understatement such as to "make heavy weather" of acclimatizing, or to "feel a bit done in" (Hillary 142, 148, 163).

The gentleman mountaineer rarely shows any signs of superstition because they might be regarded as the indicators of certain mental feebleness. Such a view point might also be a reason why landscape is described as sublime but it is devoid of a mountain that is personified and turned into a beast, like it is seen in the later mountaineering texts. Most probably the belief in the supernatural and in a mountain as a living-being with a will and mind would undermine the image of a gentleman. Thus, there are hardly any examples of superstitions found in *Upon That Mountain* and *High Adventure*, or *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*.

In these books, a mountain is seen as a problem to be solved. Thus the aims are straight-forward: to explore the unknown regions and be the first to reach the summits of the unclimbed mountains. Oftentimes the ascent is understood to be a conquest and is

described by means of military terms. At this time climbing spells adventure, freedom, the discovery of the unknown. With time it becomes a metaphor for many things, among them, the search for the essence and the sense of life.

The shift from a gentleman/lady mountaineer to a modern prodigy climber has resulted from the liberalisation of the social norms and the standards of behaviour as well as from the change of social stratum that took place on the mountaineering scene, especially in the post-WWII years. Because of a general tendency of the liberalisation of the society and due to the fact that, for example, showing emotions was less often regarded as a sign of weakness, the standards of conduct a gentleman mountaineer was expected to observe were relaxed as well. Moreover, after WWII climbing ceased to be a domain reserved solely for the upper and middle class, and the representatives of the working class discovered mountaineering as a form of leisure and could afford the costs connected with it (*One Green Bottle* is a great example of this process). This, in its turn, brought along certain frivolities of behaviour and expression as well as to a fashion of relating strong emotions by means of vocabulary usually reserved for descriptions of bodily functions.

The modern climber is quite different from the gentleman mountaineer, the explorer and the conqueror. The nowadays climber is a prodigy, an artist, a visionary. He/she is tough and exceptionally skilled, but none of the human vices are strange to him/her. Sometimes jubilant, sometimes depressed, occasionally drinking or taking drugs, he/she climbs the routes that demand not only extraordinary amount of dexterity and courage but also pure recklessness. Additionally, the modern climber neither suppresses nor fully controls his/her emotions. He/she is shown as a courageous and selfless person, a good friend and a reliable climbing partner; but the modern climber is also described in the worst moments of her/his life: disheartened, crying, scheming, or even fouling their pants in desperate situations.

This climber is more receptive to the landscape and believes in the mountains that are thinking creatures, beasts waiting to kill, against whom a war is waged. Thus, the modern climber is more inclined to accept the idea of the supernatural, which has provided a basis for a paradigm of superstitions and a foundation for a belief in the natural moral code the breach of which is inevitably punished.

The modern climber fills climbing with a new meaning. It becomes a means of escaping reality, of searching for the enlightenment, or a metaphor for achievements in life. The intrinsic nature of such achievements causes severe disillusionments at times, as it is, for example, in Vernon Rand's case (*Solo Faces*) or in Gary Hemming's case (the figure of Rand is loosely based on the life of Gary Hemming).

Female mountaineering and climbing writing have basically followed the same development stages, from a lady-mountaineer to a prodigy climber with the only distinction from the male climbing and writing: female climbers do not only want to prove to the world that they can climb but that they can climb without the help of men, as well as men, or even better than men. Women's writing motivations equal those of men with an additional aspect of telling *their own* story, making themselves heard.

Despite the above-mentioned differences, it will be argued that mountaineering literature portrays a climber as a more or less universal character: an individualist, a free, lonely spirit, oftentimes a (self-) marginalized vagabond. He/she has a peculiar set of values as well as a specific attitude to his/her climb-mates, relationships, family, career, friendship, climbing ethics, life and death. Mostly a climber is presented as a dramatic figure, an addict who, consciously, or more often subconsciously, sees climbing as a means to escape from the madness of civilization, at the same time it is a means to assert oneself in life and to assert life itself; he realises that his addiction can have a high price, yet death is seen not as something sought, but rather as a possible result of personal choices:

Even in a time of constant thrill-seeking and "adrenalin highs", the most adamant adventurer sees climbing as a sure-fire path to suicide. Those generally associated with mountain climbing are seen as somewhat deranged, having a death wish. In a television documentary dealing with the American Everest North Face Expedition, the American climber, Jim Wickwire, was asked why death seemed to override his wish to live, a question naturally directed to him as a mountaineer. His answer was that the death wish attributed to climbers is a fallacy, that, in fact, climbing is an affirmation of life and all of its goodness and joy. (Vause, *Philosophy* 438)

Hence, an important aspect in the presentation of a character of a climber is the attitude to climbing, which stops being a sport and becomes a life-style, as well as a metaphor for reaching the heights of life or escaping the mundane. As Renate del Ponto put it, "the meaning of life is found only through realizing oneself. But we realize ourselves

only by putting ourselves to the test” (Evola xi). For mountaineers it is oftentimes the daring of deeds that brings life its value.

The presentation of a character is done through many facets of a climber’s life, one of them is the attitude to or interrelation with nature. Nature is mostly spelled out as an immense source of energy and drive, but it can also contribute to horrible tragedies. In certain instances climbers tend to anthropomorphize mountains, a habit which draws on/contributes to the creation and preservation of certain superstitions. Yet most often nature and mountains are seen not as cruel forces, but rather as a withdrawn and detached substance: beautiful and murderous at the same time.

A climber’s character is also revealed in the relationship with a significant other, who oftentimes turns out to be less significant than a new route, a new expedition or a climbing partner.

Mountaineering literature gives a good insight into an image of the ideal climber/mountaineer – a born, natural climber with almost animal instincts; reliable, reserved, yet possessing a certain grain of madness, the yearning to try what others consider impossible; the one able to understand a climbing partner without speaking, almost on some supernatural level.

Sometimes the romanticizing of climbing and a climber is evident. There is a tendency of merging the self-image of the mountaineer with the romantic image of the artist, enhanced by the themes of self-assertion, conquest of the self, and escaping from the self. And as Mikel Vause stresses, “the intellectual and social implications found in mountain writing [are] offshoots of the romantic essay rather than adventure stories only” (11). By now the peril of mountaineering has been presented as heroic, and only recently negative sides of a climber’s life have been made explicit by the more realistic depictions of harsh expedition life full of dangers and challenges in its contrast with a ‘normal’ life; by narrating the anxieties others do not know; by the fact that a life oftentimes teems with grinning skulls and memories of those who had not returned. These, together with many other aspects mentioned above, contribute to a certain collective and personal identity of climbers, as well as the perception of climbers/mountaineers by others.

One of very important aspects in presenting the mountaineer/climber is through the attitude toward death. Throughout history Western culture has considered the topic of death to be a rather unpleasant one. Western society tends to fear and to reject the thought of death. At the same time, a person’s ability to accept death as an inseparable

part of life, rather than as a dreadful misfortune will eventually bring release from anxiety, thus letting one live one's life more effectively. Mountaineering is the activity that makes a person face his/her transience and mortality, especially juxtaposed with the immortality symbolized by mountains and the infinite sky and the landscape, but it becomes clear in the light of the philosopher Robert Connelly's belief that the acute awareness of death brings the obligation to accept it, which, in turn, is bound to instigate a more dignified encounter with it (see 45-66). This thought is consonant with Rollo May's theory that the acceptance of death opens immense creative possibilities for the artist, for acceptance kills fear, thus releasing creative potential; moreover, if one loves life one must face its inevitable conclusion, death (see May 56). This defiance of fear of death makes outstanding climbers/mountaineers, and oftentimes distinguished climbers bear the aura of artists. It also brings out a philosopher in a person, a wiser self, which through the realization of the meaning of life and death, and through the wise attitude towards them achieves personal integrity. In this relation climbing is not death seeking, it is the artistic need, because "the climbers are more than just sportsmen, they are artists, poets, and philosophers. Like Emerson, Wordsworth and other great thinkers and poets who believed in the divine nature of humans, they reach their god-like potential through such challenges [...]" (Vause 10).

Freud looked into the matter of risk and death and came to the conclusion that only the reality of death adds zest and meaning to life: "Life is impoverished, it loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked. It becomes shallow and empty [...]. The tendency to exclude death from our calculations in life brings in its train many other renunciations and exclusions" (Freud 290-291).

Thus the points that would help to present the character of a climber are:

- A common image of a climber and the figure of the ultimate climber
- The reasons for climbing
- Relations with the 'outside' world (the sense of marginalization), the question of belonging and identity
- Life priorities (education, work, family)
- The notion of a home
- Friendship/partnership
- The questions of life, death and aging
- Myths, beliefs, superstitions

### **Climbing Philosophy**

There are many answers offered to the above-mentioned questions, mainly embodied in the philosophy of climbing, for example, the need to be high, wild and free, an attempt to do what has not been done before, the notion that “the mountain also represents the power of vision and of enlightenment. It represents the struggle against inner ghosts; the victory over fear of solitude, silence, and the void; the capability of the awakening of the divine element within man; the power of transcendence that allows us to ascend to the top of the self” (Evola xi). Climbing/mountaineering and the risk that is attached to such a life style also symbolize the “protest against such an anesthetized existence as if found in most human settlements” (Vause 12), thus bringing many romantic elements into mountaineering philosophy, including the philosophy of risk, where “risk taking results in a very personal revelation about one’s limitations and abilities” (Vause 13) and is commonly understood as more than “the joy of survival or a sense of self-validation” but is rather “a powerful psychic and visceral kick – an exhilaration, a euphoria, a sense of heightened awareness” (Furlons 93).

Mountains are seen as a school of life (see Vause 109), aesthetics, and ascetics. Mountains do not like vanity, and do not tolerate impudence and spiritual impurity:

The mountain is a school of inner toughening, with its known victims and obscure conquerors; its highest value consists in not being able to approach it without adequate preparation, but in needing a long apprenticeship. Like any good teacher, the mountain does not love compromises and is not forgiving toward cowards or those who are inept. Thus, the ascent becomes asceticism. (Evola xi)

But to achieve such a level of self-realization, one needs a specific mind-set, inner understanding, a philosophy. There are many who climb mountains without such inner awareness. In literature they are shown as capable of achieving certain technical heights, but they are never the best, for they rarely regard climbing as anything more than a mere sport.

To summarize, the issue of climbing philosophy deals with such aspects as value systems and moral codes in climbing, climbing ethics, the paradigms of the right and the wrong and considers a climber’s vision of his/her place in the universe. Thus, in the research, Climbing Philosophy answers the question of *how* to climb whereas The Meaning of Climbing attempts at the answer of *why* one climbs.

### **Spiritual Corruption**<sup>18</sup>

In the last couple of years the question of the standards in mountain climbing has been raised over and over again. The main issues are the definition of climbing, the motives of climbing, and the ethical standards applied to climbing. In relation to these issues, growing concerns over the malign influences of civilization on a human character are voiced more and more often in regards to the modern mountaineering world. Such moral values of mountaineering as friendship, closeness to nature, building up a relationship with the mountain are being pushed out by the more pragmatic values of a modern society, predominant of which are fame and money. Mountaineering is at times used to reach these pragmatic goals, thus considerably diminishing the idealistic vision of climbing as a means of achieving intrinsic rewards. Society makes its members play by its rules, and the extrinsic rewards become a priority. Thus many begin climbing not for the sake of exploring the remaining frontier territories and their own limitations, for the expansion of spirit, or simply “because it[the mountain] is there,”<sup>19</sup> which have been the main reasons for climbing until recently, but because a successful ascent of an important mountain promises prominence and financial gain, or at least financial security. Such an approach, as well as an approach to mountaineering as entertainment only, has been repeatedly condemned by many ‘elite’ mountaineers and thinkers, for example, by Julius Evola. He wrote that

[...] we should save the mountains from the contaminating invasion of tourists who attempt to conquer them by building their “civilized” base camps. I am not just referring to those faint-hearted youths who bring with them to popular mountain resorts their vain, mundane city habits (such as discos and tennis courts), and who snobbishly display the colourful new equipment they’ve bought to use only for some harmless walk in the woods. I am also referring to those who tarnish silent and uncontaminated places with materialism and triviality, namely with a competitive spirit and a mania for that which is difficult and unusual, for the sake of setting new records. (6)

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

The meaning of climbing has been debated since the birth of this activity. Climbing “has at various times been seen as a metaphor for imperialistic conquest, spiritual ascent, arrogant self-aggrandizement, ascetic self-negation, or simple death wish” (Mazel 22). Nowadays, it is more often presented as an escape from mundane

---

<sup>18</sup>The term “spiritual corruption” is used here in the meaning of “the betrayal of one’s ethic principles and philosophic views regarding mountaineering.”

<sup>19</sup>This was the answer of one of the most prominent first British mountaineers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Leigh Mallory, to the question why he wanted to climb Everest.

problems: broken relationships, emotionally exhausting jobs, personal inadequacies, and as a way to rediscover the sense of being a part of the natural world as opposed to over-mechanized and impersonalized modern life. This is, for example, true for Abe Burns, the protagonist of *The Ascent*, and Jamie Matthewson, an outstanding climber in *The Fall*,<sup>20</sup> who tend to escape the problems or get a clearer perspective on them by doing challenging climbs or joining extreme expeditions. For Jamie, it is also the metaphoric search for his father and an attempt to prove himself superior to his father who perished on Kanchenjunga when Jamie was little.

For Sankey from *Climbers*, the only possibility to perceive the world is through climbing, which is the only sphere of life where he feels adequate and does not seem ridiculous or awkward.

For Artemis Phillips from *Beyond the Mountain* climbing offers a chance to come to terms with the tragic death of her brother Orion and with the end to an emotionally exhausting, almost destructive relationship with her husband Nicholas Rhodes, who dies together with Orion, both being her long-time and only climbing partners. Her reason to join the expedition to one of the highest mountains is “Just to make it [desiring] simple, manageable once again; no falling in love again, no convulsions of human relations, but the simplicity of a mountain, gold and silver in the first light of morning, a promise of completion carved hard against the sky” (15).

For Daniel Corder (*The Ascent*), climbing becomes an obsession of getting even with the mountains for the tragic death of his fiancée on a climb. Daniel is haunted by his inner demons and ghosts, and only by reaching the summit of Everest by the most difficult route can he have a chance of obtaining his spiritual peace at a very high price.

---

<sup>20</sup> The novel *The Fall* by Simon Mawer is not discussed in this research but it shows the tendencies evident in the presented texts.



## **The Presentation of the Character of the Climber in Classic Mountaineering Literature**

In this section the emphasis will be put on several specimens of expedition accounts and mountaineering fiction dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>21</sup> when the last big mountains were about to be climbed. The books considered in this chapter are devoted to the exploration of the possible route to reach the summit of Everest. *Upon That Mountain* is written by Eric Shipton, a prominent British explorer, adventurer and mountaineer, and features Shipton's development as a climber from his boyhood in the Alps to maturity and the peak of his climbing career in the Himalayas.

The second book, *High Adventure*, tells the story of Hillary's mountaineering career under the leadership of Eric Shipton and the subsequent success of the 1953 Everest expedition led by Major John Hunt.

The third book, *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*, is a humorous fictional account of an expedition to Rum Doodle, the highest mountain in the world, undoubtedly inspired by the 1953 Everest expedition and mocking many mountaineering accounts of this sort.

### ***Upon That Mountain. Eric Shipton***

*I did not think much about climbing,  
except as a means of seeing mountains (24)*

#### The Book

The book narrates the development of Shipton as mountaineer in the course of his climbing in the Pyrenees, the Alps, mountains in Africa and the Himalayas. The focus of Shipton's life and, consequently, of his writings was Everest but he was equally happy climbing any other mountain. The author was a devoted mountaineer but even more so a devoted explorer, who understood climbing only as a means of seeing new places.

---

<sup>21</sup> Although *Upon That Mountain* was written only in 1956, it includes the stories of Shipton's early mountaineering trips and describes author's climbing in the Alps in 1920s.

Eric Shipton was one of the first mountaineers advocating what since has become known as the ‘alpine’ style of climbing, figuring out how “to mountaineer for long and far at little cost, and without the majestic cumbrousness of preceding Himalayan tradition” (9), known as the ‘siege’ tactics. Sadly enough, his belief in small expeditions cost Shipton his leadership in the 1953 Everest expedition, which brought Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay as the first men to the summit of Everest. The route followed by the successful team was first reconnoitred in 1951 by Shipton.

The author advocated frugality in mountaineering, engaging only a minimal amount of climbers and porters and using predominantly local resources to support his expeditions (local food, interpreters and means of transportation). Thinking back on such travels Shipton described the feeling of absolute bliss, mentioning that they “lived with a sense of perfect freedom and deep physical and mental well-being. We wanted nothing” (165).

#### The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime

Landscape is one of the most important constituents of mountaineering. The landscape of Mount Everest (or any high mountain) also presents one of the major influences on the climber. In a way it influences the climber’s mental state through the region’s desolation, vastness and dangers. The impressive atmosphere, the beauty but even more so the terror of the mountain are described in numerous works of mountaineering fiction and non-fiction.

Already from his first days in the mountains Shipton recognized their potential to evoke the feeling of the sublime by their “grand desolation and an endless breadth” (23) and described the grandeur of the landscape much in the style W. Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge or P. B. Shelley had done before him: “the thundering torrents, the great rock gorges with glistening, sweating flanks, the dark pine forests that guarded the approach to the wonderland of everlasting ice and snow beyond, the great peaks infinitely remote and inaccessible and with a strange feeling of mystery and hidden treasure” (18).

The mountain glory shifts occasionally into the mountain gloom,<sup>22</sup> for instance, when Shipton sees the Rongbuk valley for the first time. In most descriptions of the mountains the author lets the reader sense his love and respect for them, which at times transform into pure awe. But Shipton is so stunned by the depressive atmosphere of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Both terms were introduced by M. Nicolson (see above).

Rongbuk valley that he depicts it in terms most typical of the early dislike of the mountains and the belief that they are the warts on the visage of the earth. They appear as a place outside time and the world, rough and primordial:

The Rongbuk valley is a grim and desolate place, a waste of stones shut in from all pleasant prospects, flanked by shapeless, disintegrating walls of rock. Its upper end is dominated by the huge mass of Everest. Seen from the top of the surrounding peaks, this northern face of the mountain has a fine simplicity of design and a certain grandeur, though even then it cannot compare with the magnificent architecture of the eastern and southern aspects. But from the Base Camp it appears stunted and deformed, a mere continuation of the graceless forms about it. (122)

Although Shipton is highly perceptive of the landscape, discerning and appreciating the slightest ‘change of mood’ in the scenery, he expresses the sublime not as the feeling evoked by the grandeur of the surroundings but as “intellectual ecstasy [...resulting from] a happy coincidence in the rhythm of mind and scene” (30). Despite his deep love for the mountains, Shipton admits that at high altitudes “one is not usually in a mood for aesthetic enjoyment” (135) because “altitude has the same effect upon the mind as upon the body – one’s intellect becomes dull and unresponsive” (135). High altitude together with bitter cold and ferocious wind make the upper reaches of Everest a very hostile place where the smallest mistake on the part of a climber can be fatal. Yet at times “the magnificence of the view penetrated even my [Shipton’s] jaded mind” (136): “the colossal ramparts that join Everest with Lhotse, the delicately fluted ridges of purest ice, a hundred peaks of exquisite form” (147).

#### The Presentation of Character. Climbing Philosophy

In the course of his book Shipton introduces a number of his climbing companions and indirectly draws his own portrait as a mountaineer. Naturally, the team-mates differ from each other but they have very prominent features, which, if combined, form a picture of the ultimate mountaineer as Shipton sees him. This image is redrawn in many mountaineering writings of the time, one of them being *High Adventure* by Edmund Hillary, one of the most prominent climbers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who started his career under Shipton’s leadership.

The ultimate climber is presented as a strong and daring person but possessing “imperturbable temperament” (42); he is a traveller eager to see new places, undaunted by any obstacles, selfless, working toward the success of a team, displaying enthusiasm even in the worst situations, seeing difficulties only as challenges. *Upon That Mountain*

features such a climber in the person of H. W. Tilman, a long-time friend and partner of the author: tough, with “a remarkable ability to put up with – even a liking for – unpleasant conditions” (76), taciturn but possessing such very important qualities as “his tremendous sense of humour and his constant readiness to embark upon any project” (76).

One of the distinctive features in the presentation of the character of the climber in the early mountaineering writings is his dignity. The climber never loses his composure; his sufferings are dealt with in a very laconic and matter-of-fact manner, which should reflect the stoic character of the mountaineer. Consider Shipton’s succinct mentioning of some of his health problems: “It was here that I began to feel very sick. I imagine that the tin of meat essence I had eaten on the summit was bad. But an hour or so later I was very sick, and after that I felt more philosophical about it” (89).

Modern examples of mountaineering literature feature quite graphic descriptions of ailment symptoms and physical conditions, at times even giving the impression of a certain obsession with one’s health (the examples are dealt with in this paper in the chapters on *The Ascent*, *The Climb* and *Into Thin Air*). In recent mountaineering writings the problem of the mal-/functioning of the body at high altitudes is also given much more prominence than was done in the early days of mountaineering as detailed discussions of such problems were considered below the dignity of the mountaineer. For example, in classic writings the mentioning of a crevasse used as a latrine or “a bed-pan in the form of a biscuit box” (129) seems almost revolutionary, whereas the same issue is given much attention in *Into Thin Air* and *Left For Dead*.

Not only illnesses are seen as diminishing the image of the ultimate mountaineer. On one occasion Shipton relates his and Tilman’s trip hampered by slippery moss as “an undignified descent to our base. We slipped and slithered on moss- and lichen-covered rocks, and spent most of the time sitting down heavily on the ground” (100). The author seems equally embarrassed by being “ridiculously self-conscious about [their] acclimatisation” (120), counting heart-beats and watching breathing, whenever he is thinking back on his first trip to Everest in 1933.

However, Shipton makes an effort to record his and his companions’ physical reactions to the effects of high altitudes as well as the rapid physical deterioration of the team due to the lack of knowledge in this field at the time. The author also analyses the walking tempo and stride size then providing pieces of advice which should help the progress on the upper reaches of the mountain. Yet at the time he is not even sure

whether it is possible to climb above 29,000 feet or to stay alive for a few days over 27,400 feet.

In the course of the climb Shipton, as well as his companions, suffers from a number of high altitude symptoms such as general weakness, diarrhoea, vomiting, mental confusion, apathy, aphasia, loss of voice, blinding headache, etc. Yet the matter-of-fact manner of describing the ailments suggests that the purpose of documenting them is purely scientific and Shipton is suffering more from “the pitying looks of [his] companions” (146) whenever such things happened than from the conditions themselves.

At times Shipton relates his experiences on the mountain in a gentle, mocking tone. For example, the author relaxes his ‘standards of poise’ when mentioning arguments. They are presented in a way that shows all the participants in no unfavourable light and are mostly explained by the malign influence of altitude and anticipations frustrated by the bad weather. One such instance is related in a rather humorous and self-critical way: “[b]eing unable to speak above a whisper, I found it difficult to quarrel successfully with anyone, and it would have been too exhausting to attempt to pull my opponent’s beard. Had I been psycho-analysed at the time, I would no doubt have been found to be suffering from some fierce repressions” (129).

On another occasion Shipton draws a rather comic picture of himself and his companion thawing their boots and trying to stuff their feet, already encased in four or five pairs of socks, into them. The following depiction creates a burlesque figure: the dignified mountaineer in his quite ridiculous attire. The image is even funnier if modern climbing clothes are taken into consideration:

For the rest we each wore two pairs of long woollen pants, seven sweaters and a loosely-fitting windproof with a hood that went over a balaclava helmet. Our hands were protected by one pair of thick woollen mits covered with a pair of sheepskin gauntlets. I felt about as suitably equipped for delicate rock-climbing as a fully rigged deep-sea diver for dancing a tango. (142)

Writing about his climbing philosophy, Shipton underlines the utmost importance of travel as an inseparable aspect of mountaineering and thinks little of guided trips, as they deprive one of a chance to explore. Even less appealing to him are such famous climbing centres like Zermatt or Chamonix because one is inevitably shoved into the pre-set system of ‘valued’ routes or mountains and has to deal with “an atmosphere of fevered competition” (46). For the author the aura of virginity a mountain emanates is one of the most significant aspects of the activity because “[i]n a less-frequented district

there is a sense of freedom of choice, and it is easy to imagine that the route one takes has never been climbed before” (40). Shipton propagates the philosophy of respect towards the mountains, all mountains: big, small, famous or never heard of. In his opinion, climbing itself “gives a spice of adventure” (42) and “its real function is to provide a medium for experience” (42). Additionally, the experience gained with his companions of matching climbing skills is of utmost importance because in such situations “[t]he new responsibility of decision and action, the feeling of self-reliance, the modest triumphs shared by a companion of equal standing and similar outlook sharpened the whole field of sensibility and deepened delight” (42-43).

Shipton’s philosophy of climbing excludes not only climbing with guides but also the usual grandeur and extravaganza of the British mountaineering expeditions. He propagates a very Spartan way of climbing which gives the feeling of being connected to nature and mountains. He writes:

[...] there is much to be gained by frugality. To my mind a large measure of the charm of mountaineering lies in its simplicity; a rope, an ice-axe, dark glasses and nailed boots are all the special equipment that is needed; the object is uncomplicated; the rest lies in the physical, mental and aesthetic contact of the climber with his mountains. The simpler the approach the easier it is to achieve a synthesis. At least that is the only way in which I can explain the feeling I have so often experienced on large and luxuriously equipped Himalayan expeditions, and on rare occasions when I have climbed from a big hotel, a feeling of having lost touch with the essence of the life I was subconsciously seeking. (44-45)

There are a number of reasons why Shipton opposes large expeditions, most important of which are the possibility to get to know the expedition porters individually, which should contribute to “a greater mutual understanding and trust” (150), prevent looting, usually plaguing large expeditions, and to increase mobility of the party as well as each party member’s commitment to the common goal and to avoid competition. Shipton is convinced that “[t]he strongest mountaineering party is one in which each member has implicit confidence in all his companions, recognises their vital importance in the common effort and feels himself to have an equally indispensable part to play” (151).

In Shipton’s view, competition and publicity play a very negative part in expeditions putting additional strain on the climbers and potentially leading to a disaster. He describes such attention and rivalry as “out of all proportions to the value of the undertaking” (153). The negative influence of publicity has since become a recurrent theme in mountaineering literature. Another issue Shipton feels committed to is to prevent the ascent of Everest from becoming a metaphor for “a triumph of humanity over Nature” (153) and to avoid “an extraordinary distortion of values which

has its roots in the opening of a short-cut to fame” (153). These pronouncements have become prophetic, especially seen in the light of the recent developments in the mountaineering community.<sup>23</sup> To Shipton, the work of his whole life is to climb Everest, but he sees the mountain only as a mountaineering problem and adventure and warns against attributing any additional features to it.

---

<sup>23</sup> The topic is discussed in terms of “outside pressure” in *Solo Faces*, *The Ascent*, *The Climb* and *Into Thin Air*.

### ***High Adventure. Edmund Hillary***

#### The Book

*High Adventure* is a collection of personal accounts of several expeditions Edmund Hillary participated in. Some of them are the expeditions led by Eric Shipton,<sup>24</sup> a very prominent mountaineer by that time. The book reaches its climax in the chapters dealing with the first ascent of Everest in 1953 completed by Hillary and Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay.

Although Edmund Hillary was a New Zealand mountaineer it is justifiable to regard his works in this thesis dealing primarily with English and American literature because he achieved his biggest success as a member of a British expedition, he saw himself as a British subject, and he was knighted by the young queen<sup>25</sup> after he had reached the summit of Mount Everest, which was proclaimed to be the greatest victory of British mountaineering.

As is the case with Eric Shipton, the crucial role in the beginning of Hillary's life-long passion for mountains is the influence on him of the mountain landscape, which gives the feeling of freedom, adventure, excitement and achievement. Once Hillary becomes aware of the mountains he finds his inspiration in the books of Frank Smythe<sup>26</sup> and Eric Shipton and develops his climbing skills in the New Zealand Alps, the Alps in Austria and Switzerland and then in the Himalayas. In 1951 Edmund Hillary is invited to take part in the Everest expedition led by Eric Shipton himself, Hillary's mountaineering idol.

#### The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime

As in Shipton's case, landscape has a great influence on Hillary, who expresses awe and admiration for the impressive scenery in numerous instances. The more impressive the landscape becomes the more superlatives does Hillary use to describe the feeling of the sublime he experiences. At one time he and his companions look aghast at a wild river they have to cross, "[a] great turgid mass of water tearing its way with relentless fury

---

<sup>24</sup> The 1951 Everest reconnaissance expedition and the 1952 Cho Oyu expedition. Shipton was named as leader of the 1953 Everest expedition but stepped down and replaced by John Hunt as the Joint Himalayan Committee of the Alpine Club and Royal Geographic Society did not favour Shipton's frugal approach to the organization of expeditions and believed that Hunt's military leadership experience and climbing credits made him the best possible leader of the 1953 Everest expedition.

<sup>25</sup> The news reached England on the day Queen Elisabeth II was coronated.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Smythe and Eric Shipton were together on several expeditions in the Himalayas.



down into the plains of India. Huge tree trunks were sailing by faster than you could run” (30). In another instant Hillary is awed by the sight of majestic but frightening mountains:

[...] high above the early autumn tints, towered the unbelievable peaks of the Khumba region – mighty ice-fluted faces, terrific rock buttresses, and razor-sharp jagged ice ridges soaring up to impossible summits. These peaks were rarely more than 22,000 feet high, but I found it hard to believe that they would ever be climbed. (44)

Rivers and mountain peaks are described as ‘colossal,’ making the climbers ‘stop aghast’; the view is ‘magnificent,’ ‘superb.’ Hillary is overwhelmed by the grandeur of the scenery but even more so by nature’s immense powers, the revelation of which evokes in him the feeling of fear. Awe and trepidation thus lead to the experience of the sublime.

Trying to do justice to the landscape, Hillary makes extensive use of imagery. *Grim and forbidding ice-cliffs, a shrieking inferno of wind-whipped rock and ice, fiendishly steep faces, a purgatory of fractured ice, tremendous drops* beneath his feet, the ice gulley as a *death-trap*, make Hillary shiver, yet they do not conceal from him the *superb, magnificent views*, the snow glowing red in the setting sun, and *the rugged beauty* of the mountains. For Hillary the breathtaking views are even more thrilling because it is a virgin territory and the author with his companions are among the first people to visit the region and to stand on the peaks.

The Everest region is depicted, like in many books before or after Hillary, as an alien, hostile place, able to break a person’s spirit merely by its dimensions. A number of locations Hillary has to pass through are described as gloomy, unhealthy-looking, shocking or malevolent. For example, one of the ice-falls is presented as incredibly formidable and forbidding:

In front of us a great icefall tumbled down thousands of feet in an utter chaos of shattered ice. The icefall was split by a great rock buttress, and the ice surged around it like the bow-wave of a destroyer. It was a vast and spectacular sight, but I felt completely subdued at the thought of finding a way up it. The right-hand icefall with its row after row of tottering ice pinnacles, looked decidedly dangerous, and the left-hand one crashed over an enormous rock bluff almost continuously. (93)

Hillary draws mountain gloom and mountain glory in equal measure and with equal eloquence. Naturally, one also anticipates the description of the majestic views opening up from the top of the world, which will evoke the feeling of the sublime in the narrator. The reader expects the author to be excited and elated by his achievement, but is

disappointed. Despite Hillary's happiness about having reached the top of Everest, "a satisfaction [...] more powerful than [he] had ever felt on a mountain top before" (239), he becomes the first person to describe the experience of the summit as quite anticlimactic.<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly such an anticlimax is mostly due to the geography of the mountain and to the fact that the top of Everest indicates only the middle of the arduous way, but Hillary establishes a certain tradition of the 'disappointing summit' by describing the lack of euphoria on the top of the world: "I was too tired and too conscious of the long way down to safety really to feel any great elation" (239).

### The Presentation of Character. Climbing Philosophy

From the very beginning of the book it becomes evident that one of Hillary's most revered figures of the contemporary Himalayan mountaineers is Eric Shipton, famous for "his tough trips, his ability to go to great heights, and his policy of having cheap and mobile expeditions by living largely off the land" (37). Expecting to encounter a very well-dressed and groomed British expedition leader Hillary is immensely relieved to see that Shipton and his companions look like a thoroughly "disreputable bunch" (38), cheerful vagabonds enjoying their time.

The feature that can be found in both *Upon That Mountain* and *High Adventure* is undying enthusiasm and high spirits. Nothing can upset a real adventurer and a mountaineer, and even if one of the climbers is disheartened, it is only for a short time. Shipton, as the leader of the expedition, is an example in everything:

Life was pretty grim when we settled down for the night. All our clothes were wet and so were our sleeping-bags. And the smell was hard to put up with. The rain was pounding down on our flimsy roof and it was leaking in a dozen places. But nothing seemed able to disturb Shipton. Sitting in his sleeping-bag, with his umbrella over his head to divert the drips, he puffed at his pipe and read a novel in the flickering light of a candle. He couldn't have looked more contented in an easy chair at home in front of a cosy fire. (40-41)

In *High Adventure* Hillary describes his excitement over exploring virgin territories, his admiration for the grandeur of the scenery, the sense of achievement after every trip. Yet he admits that the most impressive things are Eric Shipton's character and leadership qualities, his taking good care of those in his charge, "his ability to be calm and comfortable in any circumstances; his insatiable curiosity to know what lay over the

---

<sup>27</sup> In Book VI of *The Prelude* William Wordsworth described a similar feeling of anticlimax he had experienced crossing the Simplon Pass: the expectation of the sublime had been disappointed by the unremarkable summit of the pass.

next hill or around the next corner; and, above all, his remarkable power to transform the discomfort and pain and misery of high-altitude life into a great adventure” (53-54).

The descriptions of the problems of the camp life, ailments or personal weaknesses are treated even with more reserve than in Shipton’s *Upon That Mountain*, and mentioned only in passing, for example, “Bourdillon was finding the altitude a little too much for him” (49), which seems to be an understatement as Bourdillon most probably was suffering blazing headaches, nausea, shortness of breath or vomiting in any possible combination.

Edmund Hillary also offers comments on his reactions to difficulties and danger, presenting himself as a very energetic person, who, although it is “bitterly cold,” finds the air “crisp and invigorating” (55), feeling only “decidedly puzzled and not a little frightened” (55) when a big chunk of ice falls down a crevasse, which sounds like an earthquake and makes the Sherpas fall to the ground in fear. Litotes are also found in the way Hillary relays the sentiments of the party at crossing the icefall baptized the “Atom Bomb” area as “not without some trepidation” (57). This extraordinary feat of skills and courage is explained by a statement that “care and caution would never make a route through the icefall” (58).

Yet despite his stoicism Hillary admits to having a bad headache, feeling weak and struggling for breath, (all the symptoms of altitude sickness), but as soon as the party is acclimated, they are again on the route, “in the crisp conditions, kick[ing] steps with enthusiasm” (74). The process of cutting steps in the ice which must have been dull and arduous is described as “invigorating work” (75).

It seems that although Hillary admits to feeling scared, lonely or sick sometimes, in his perspective any sign of weakness lessens the dignity of the mountaineer: a defeat makes him feel ashamed, the attempt of Hillary’s partner to rub his feet back to life to prevent frostbite brings about “a slight feeling of resentment” (86), or his faint-heartedness in particularly tight spots, which makes his “stomach tight with fear” (95) evokes the feeling of contempt for himself.

Shipton’s and Hillary’s ideas about the ultimate mountaineer as an enthusiastic, curious traveller, and a daring and tough vagabond who possesses great dignity coincide and together represent a typical image of the mountaineer, found in numerous fiction and non-fiction mountaineering writings of that time.

***The Ascent of Rum Doodle. W. E. Bowman***

The Novel

*The Ascent of Rum Doodle* (1956) by W. E. Bowman is a short parody novel on an expedition account to the high mountains and was undoubtedly inspired by the accounts of expeditions organized to reach the summits of numerous big mountains for the first time. Among the greatest influences was Edmund Hillary's and Tenzing Norgay's success on Everest in 1953.

*The Ascent of Rum Doodle* features a large British mountaineering expedition to the summit of Rum Doodle, which lies in the Yogistani region at 40,000<sup>1/2</sup> feet and is the highest mountain in the world. The leader of the expedition describes everything in great detail: the team members, preparations, the way to the foot of Rum Doodle, different obstacles and logistic challenges met by the group and the success of reaching the summit of Rum Doodle. The fact that the top of the mountain is reached by mistake does not lessen the sense of achievement.

The disclaimer indicates that “no criticism of any mountaineering book or method, and no reference to any mountaineer past or present is intended” (4) but the book reveals numerous parallels to the accounts of mountaineering expeditions of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those of Eric Shipton and Edmund Hillary among them. Although *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* is a story of one ascent whereas *Upon That Mountain* narrates the events of several expeditions, both books are written from the position of a leader.<sup>28</sup> In both cases the ultimate goal is to reach the summit of the highest mountain in the world, Rum Doodle and Everest respectively. The events take place at approximately the same time period, both narratives describe difficulties in organizing an expedition in a distant mountainous region (Yogistan and the Himalayas) and both narrators contemplate the role of a good leader and what it takes to be one. From the first lines of *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* the credit is given to “magnificent team work and the splendid efforts of the porters, without whom the expedition would have failed” (11). These are also seen as the main success criteria from Shipton's point of view, who believes that a united and experienced team accompanied by able and devoted Sherpas is more important than a strong leader.

Shipton, like many other early Everest explorers has to overcome the numerous logistic difficulties of finding a way to the mountain, selecting and managing the

---

<sup>28</sup> In Shipton's case, the expedition accounts where either he was the leader or there was no formal leader.

porters, calculating and transporting food and equipment. The same problems plague the leader of the Rum Doodle expedition, who records the party's tribulations in great detail:

Five porters would be needed for this [a part of equipment]. Two porters would be needed to carry the food for these five, and another would carry the food for these two. His food would be carried by a boy. The boy would carry his own food. [...] In all, to transport tents and equipment, food, radio, scientific and photographic gear, personal effects, and so on, three thousand porters and three hundred and seventy-five boys would be required. (13)

Yet the ironic presentation of the transportation and provision problems on the Rum Doodle expedition draws heavily on actual accounts, for example, Hillary's mentioning of having five high-altitude Sherpas and thirty-nine Sherpa coolies for six members of the 1953 Everest Expedition in his *High Adventure*, or Shipton's descriptions of provision problem in *Upon That Mountain*:

But beside this food,<sup>29</sup> which was calculated to keep the party alive for three and a half months, we had to take with us food for the men who were carrying it, and also food for those who had to carry the porters' food. (227)

We had reduced our equipment to the barest minimum, but even so we required a hundred local men. Of these about one-third were to carry the food and equipment to be used in the Shaksgam, the rest were needed to carry food which they ate themselves. (228)

Other topics common for the three discussed books are:

- the effects of high altitude
- public attention and mountaineering as shortcuts to fame (see Shipton 153): "[i]f the summit were reached the successful pair would, if photogenic and under sixty, be offered film contracts for a picture entitled 'Tarzan and the Atrocious Snowmen'" (Bowman 15).
- inevitably, some space in *Upon That Mountain* (225), *High Adventure* (115) and *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* (24) is devoted to the Abominable Snowman or Yeti.

### The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime

In any mountaineering account there is a short historical note on the mountain to be climbed and a tribute is paid to the climbers who have made significant contributions to the attempts to reach the summit. Thus Shipton mentions George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine in *Upon That Mountain*, whereas Hillary mentions Mallory, Irvine and

---

<sup>29</sup> About one and a half tons of food.

Shipton in his *High Adventure*. Following this tradition, the narrator of *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* includes the history of Rum Doodle exploration, mentioning previous reconnaissance trips and their achievements, and provides the plan of camps to be placed on the mountain.

*The Ascent of Rum Doodle* also repeats many clichés of typical classic mountaineering accounts in terms of the admiration for the landscape, the experience of the sublime and the presentation of a mountain as an impressive but also a hostile and alien place: “[a] month later we stood on the summit of the Rankling La facing the Rum Doodle massif, nature’s last citadel against the conquering spirit of man. The great mountain itself, standing majestic against a cloudless sky, struck awe into the hearts of the puny creatures who were soon to set presumptuous foot on those dreadful slopes” (30). Or “But as we stood on the Rankling La we were awed by the mighty bastion which reared its majestic head against the cloudless sky. As we stood there, Constant spoke for all of us: ‘She stands like a goddess, defying those who would set sacrilegious feet on her unsullied shrine’” (31).

The exagaggeratingly high-flown style of Constant’s comment not only contributes to the humorous effect but also accurately mimics the elevated style of many actual accounts. Additional humorous effect is, at times, produced by the play of words, for example, when the narrator describes the grand landscape and the feeling of the sublime it has evoked in him:

The view was breathtaking. To the left North Doodle towered above the little camp, inhospitable and awe-inspiring. To the right the great shoulder of Rum Doodle towered above me, bleak and dreadful in the evening light. Below on the glacier, Base Camp was a group of dots. The glacier wound away into the distance, losing itself among a chaos of snow-capped peaks and pinnacles. To the East a wilderness of desolation extended, peak after mighty peak, as far as the eye could see. It was breathtaking. Spires and pinnacles soared skyward in profusion, taking one’s breath away.

Breathless, I returned to my tent. (64-66)

#### The Presentation of Character. Climbing Philosophy

*The Ascent of Rum Doodle* presents 6 mountaineers, each praised as even more able and experienced than the previous one, as their records included at the beginning of the account indicate. Together they constitute a team where “the desires of the individual must be subordinated to the common cause” (18). The seventh member of the group is the leader of the expedition, who is conscious of his responsibilities and shows concern about the team spirit, sharing the opinion of O. Totter, a Rum Doodle committee

authority, that “when you are swinging helplessly at the end of a hundred-foot rope it is important to know that the man on the other hand is a *friend*” (19). The leader of the expedition presents himself as a stoic and forbearing person, “carrying his burden alone” (29), successfully manipulating the human element (see 34), but being constantly aware of the fact that “six human lives depended on [his] clear thinking and decisive action” (39).

The team consists of a wide variety of mountaineering characters, all of whom are very prominent in one way or another:

Tom Burley, Major in the RASC. In charge of the commissariat.<sup>30</sup> Known for his prodigious feats of endurance but constantly suffering from London lassitude, heat lassitude, valley lassitude, Base Camp lassitude, etc.

Christopher Wish, scientist to the expedition, whose complete scientific findings (actually found for him by the porters) are lost on the last day of the trip.

Donald Shute, the photographer who never manages to operate his equipment in the right way so that no photographic record of the expedition exists.

Humphrey Jungle, radio expert and route finder, who misses a considerable part of the expedition because he fails to find his way around. Later it is revealed that Jungle’s wanderings, “all *towards* somewhere” are his attempt to “find his spiritual home” (96), but since he does not know where he is going, he often loses his way, leading the whole team along.

Lancelot Constant, diplomat and linguist, who manages to provoke numerous riots among the local population due to the pronunciation difficulties of the Yogistani language.

Ridley Prone, doctor to the expedition and the oxygen expert, who is constantly suffering from all possible ailments: malaria, cough feets, “mysterious and complicated symptoms, namely: pallor, profuse sweating, pulse rapid and soft, temperature sub-normal, deep breathing and sighing, restlessness and thirst, cold extremities, faintness, dizziness and buzzing in the ears” (45).

The characters of the team members help to create an ironic picture of huge expeditions to the Himalaya and Karakoram regions with the attempts to study, describe and systematize everything unknown or unusual from the European point of view and to climb every mountain yet unclimbed. Numerous other mountaineering issues are also voiced, some of which, although undoubtedly taken as a good joke by readers, reflect

---

<sup>30</sup> Responsible for the provision of supplies.

the then-existing or even modern sentiments of the climbing community. For example, Jungle's reason for climbing Rum Doodle is "to escape from mechanical civilization and everything that it stood for" (51), a reason found in many other fiction and non-fiction writings. Constant pronounces that he "climbed to demonstrate the triumph of the spirit over adverse circumstances" (51). This statement provokes the discussion of unaided climbing, an issue very topical until nowadays, and leaves the question directed at Constant and all supporting his views of whether his "triumphant spirit was prepared to climb Rum Doodle in a loin cloth, or worse" (51) hang in the air. The aspect of unaided climbing, or rather, fair climbing, finds its place, among others, in *Upon That Mountain* by Shipton and in *The Climb* by Boukreev.

Apart from ethical aspects, medical and scientific issues are considered. Thus, the narrator documents bodily responses to high altitude, giving much attention to a number of unsolved physiological problems and mysteries, for example, the case with the expedition porter So Lo: "[m]ountaineering at 27,000 feet was supposed to be something almost super-human; yet So Lo, without oxygen, was cutting steps as quickly as we, with oxygen, could climb them. It was all wrong; and it worried me" (80).

Traditionally many understatements are found in mountaineering texts when difficulties, ailments and worries are described. Weaknesses are generally presented as unmanly, although the 'standard of poise' is relaxed under extreme circumstances and understanding is offered to the ones suffering from the effects of the rarefied atmosphere at high altitudes, which, of course, are closely monitored and documented for scientific purposes. Many privations and signs of physical deterioration, presented in *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* in an ironic key, reflect the climbing reality and the dilemma of choosing between two (or more) evils in trying to get rid of one ailment thus causing the next one:

To keep my stomach-ache under control I had taken little breakfast, and was weak with hunger. I fed myself with dyspepsia tablets, which gave me a headache. I found by accident that licking the glacier-cream off my face gave my stomach some relief. Unfortunately, this resulted in both sunburn and a frozen tongue, and when I put my tongue back in my mouth to thaw it gave me toothache. (95)

Overall, the leader of the expedition describes his team-mates, directly and indirectly, as very skilful mountaineers, intelligent people, each an asset to the expedition, professionals contributing to the success of the trip by their knowledge in the respective areas, by "allowing no personal grief to interfere with duty" (126), by cooperation and



by managing the porters. Everything works out in the best way, only the porters surprise ever so often:

That day's work was truly phenomenal. On arriving at the foot of his ice slope Shute wisely decided to give his porters lessons in icecraft. He first showed them how to cut steps, then let them try it for themselves. They picked it up very quickly – so quickly, in fact, that Shute and Constant could hardly keep up with them. (59)

The reader, juxtaposing given information and the reality, grasps the dramatic irony and sees a completely different picture: a bunch of overconfident amateurs and simpletons, who are constantly getting in trouble even on even ground and are managed by their porters, and who reach the summit of Rum Doodle only due to a misunderstanding. The porters are seen as those always in need of a strong hand and useful tips, but they turn out to be very self-sufficient and skilful climbers (unlike the expedition members), just not interested in following instructions or being bossed around:

We moved off early. Our wet boots froze immediately; short of a rise in temperature, nothing but an amputation could have separated us from them. We fell all over the place and sometimes went to sleep where we lay. So Lo and Lo Too kept saving our lives; but at last they seemed to get tired of it, for they threw us on top of their loads and carried us for the rest of the day. (85)

The account draws the collective image of a perfect mountaineer, who always shows the triumph of spirit over matter, is modest, unselfish, calm and confident, and puts “a brave front [...] in a situation of great peril” (39). He bears his sufferings in a dignified way and will not disgrace the name of the mountaineer but will die as a gentleman, if need be. The leader of the expedition indirectly presents himself as an example of stoicism, perseverance, composure and countless other merits. In the most difficult times his team-mates' welfare is his priority. When he is stranded, his concern is not for himself but for the success of the expedition. On one occasion he is suffering all sorts of symptoms, yet manages, by sheer power of will, to reach Camp 4 where his presence is demanded. The use of anaphora underlines his determination. The situation itself underlines his complete uselessness as a leader or climb-mate:

No, I said; I would not fail. I said it was time I stopped feeling sorry for myself. I had been telling myself that I was miserable, and, being a naturally truthful person, I had believed myself. The remedy was plain: I must tell myself something cheerful.

I told myself that my knees were firm and my feet straight. I told myself that I was gaining strength with every step. I said that my stomach-ache was hardly worth thinking about [...].

I talked to myself all day. I think I was on the point of convincing myself when, sometime in the late afternoon, I fancied my eyes were getting weak and

began to fear snow-blindness. I told myself that this was all imagination. I tried hard to convince myself of this, and it did at last seem that my eyes were improving. But when I reached Camp 4 I found that my goggles had frosted over. (99)

The irony is made even more explicit when the reader understands that the team, as well as the porters, seem to be much better off without their leader and try to avoid his company and his leadership as best as they can. He is neither the most experienced climber, nor the brightest person, and is repeatedly hoodwinked by the rest of the group.

Like any good mountaineering account, *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* is not limited to a mere description of routes, challenges and climbers, but also includes ongoing philosophical discussions on the importance of team-spirit and of a closely-knit community and in which “the desires of an individual must be subordinated to the common cause” (18), and if at least one member of the expedition has reached the summit of Rum Doodle, it means that every single climber of the team has succeeded. But it will be considered that the expedition has succeeded only when the summit of the mountain has been reached by fair means, that is, without the use of artificial aids. Some of the climbers even proclaim the principle that if Rum Doodle cannot be conquered without artificial aids it should be left unclimbed. But the team decides eventually on a less principal position and engages every possible aid to achieve their aim. But their spirit triumphs nonetheless.

## The Presentation of the Character of the Climber and Climbing Philosophy in Modern Mountaineering Literature

*Solo Faces. James Salter*

### The Novel

The novel was written in 1979, but had been first thought of as a film script. The character of the protagonist Vernon Rand is loosely built upon the figure of a charismatic American climber of the 1950-60s, Gary Hemming,

[...] a tall, dreamy Californian with shaggy blonde hair and bohemian inclinations – [who] had been residing in France for five years, mostly in Chamonix but occasionally in Paris as well, where he slept under bridges by the Seine. [In 1969], for the reasons that are still puzzled over, Hemming would get drunk in a Teton campground and put a bullet through his own head. (Krakauer, *Eiger Dreams* 95)

There are numerous parallels between the lives of Gary Hemming and Vernon Rand: the former was born, the latter lived in California (at least when he is introduced to the reader), both had records of guiding in the Tetons, both spent about five years in France, mostly in Chamonix and occasionally in Paris. Both performed a stirring rescue operation on the west face of the Petit Dru. The only difference was that Hemming's team rescued two inexperienced Germans, while Rand's team saved Italians. The circumstances, however, were strikingly similar. Both climbers, the fictional and the real, became the dears of the media after the incredible rescue. The following quote refers to Hemming but can be also successfully projected onto Rand: "Hemming was suddenly a hero, transformed overnight from a penniless, maladjusted climber into a perfect blonde god, and launched into enduring myth" (Krakauer, *Eiger Dreams* 96). Finally, in the lives of both climbers a gun incident played a significant role, in Hemming's case, fatal.

The novel is a quest for understanding oneself and for finding one's place in the world. It is the story of seeking but, unfortunately, not the story of finding. From this perspective, the novel is, to a certain extent, a *bildungsroman*, for it shows the formative experiences of the protagonist and the development, or, in this case, rather the spiritual decline of Vernon Rand, as a result of his fruitless search.

James Salter (real name Horowitz) has never gained large commercial success, yet he is

considered to be an outstanding stylist and an underrated writer, though this feeling of being underrated has been reduced by the New York State Author award, 1998-2000. Out of his six novels and several story collections only *Solo Faces* deals at large with the mountaineering theme, though the theme of extreme sports also surfaces in a film script, *Downhill Racer* (1969).

The critical reception of the novel under discussion ranged from high praise for stunning and lyrical prose “reminding readers of Camus and Saint-Exupery” (Dirda), and belonging to “the great modern tradition of Conrad and Hemingway and Malraux” (Hynes) to criticism for his narrative technique and sparing style. Additionally, by some climbers the novel is considered to be of lesser value as it is written by an outsider: Salter did some climbing only while researching for the novel. Audrey Salkeld and Rosie Smith summarize the reception of the novel emphasising that:

*Solo Faces* by James Salter (1980) [...] has been criticized for its minimalist style, and for unashamed machismo as well as an intensity-for-its-own-sake. Some climbers were dismissive, too, because they did not see the author as a ‘true believer’: he climbed for a while with Royal Robbins (who occasionally was a rope-mate of Gary Hemming), largely it seems as research for his novel, then went his way. (12)

Despite the overall positive reviews there were some aspects which were repeatedly criticized, one of them was the extent to which Salter made use of the climbing jargon and whether he managed to explain it.

The novel is written in a very sparing style, which also contributes to the portrayal of the protagonist as a person of few words. Yet there is a considerable difference between Rand and the gentleman-mountaineers described above: unlike Shipton, Hillary or the leader of the Rum Doodle expedition, who understate their privations and sufferings Rand simply does not seem able to form them into words even for himself. The attention to details or, at times, their lack<sup>31</sup> plays an important role: their dismissal offers the readers a global view on things, and when an occasional emphasis is made, it functions as a metonymy, conveying a complex notion constructed by this seemingly insignificant detail. The disregard for details in the novel accentuates universal principles and human values that surpass the particularity of any personal experience. Yet sparse particularities of experience bring out personalities and become instances and examples of the human condition.

---

<sup>31</sup> There are many ‘bodily’ details but, for example, some relationships are reduced to a phrase like ‘they were friends’ with no further singularities.

## **The Plot**

Rand lives in LA with his Mexican girl-friend Louise and her 11-year-old son. Rand makes his living by doing odd jobs. He used to be a good climber but seems to be less interested in climbing until on one of the Sunday climbs on the outskirts of LA Rand meets an old friend and climbing partner of his, Jack Cabot. When Jack tells Rand about the climbs he has done and is planning to do, he plants a seed of unrest in Rand's heart. The image of the snowy peaks and the yearning for daring climbs start haunting Rand again, and one day he leaves everything behind and goes to Chamonix, the Mecca of climbing.

By and by Rand gets into serious climbing again, and in Chamonix a myth about him starts taking shape after a number of his daring climbs, especially after his miraculous survival of a bad storm on the Freney Pillar. The enigmatic aura around him is also created through his secluded, ascetic life in a tent on the outskirts of the town.

A new climbing season is marked by Cabot's arrival in Chamonix to climb with Rand and their successful climb of a very challenging route, which brings them fame and recognition.

When Cabot leaves, Rand's life takes on a different shape because of his relationship with Catherin, an assistant in a Chamonix sports shop. Catherin becomes his rescue and comfort for his pain when Cabot does not tell Rand anything about his plans for the winter Eiger ascent, their common dream, and when Rand learns that his friend, John Bray, has fallen to his death climbing with Cabot on the Eiger.

Rand is attached to Catherin but decides to break up with her when he finds out that she is expecting a baby from him. He is afraid of getting tied down and flees from this danger to the mountains. There he completes another incredible climb: he leads the team that saves the stranded Italians from a very difficult spot in the Dru. As a result of this fact he becomes famous overnight. He moves to Paris for some time and with the help of his Parisian mistress, Colette, leads a troubled life, basking in luxury and media attention.

After a while, however, he feels almost destroyed by Paris and returns to the mountains again to turn into a complete recluse. But the outer world has not released its hold of him. Rand feels that he is now expected to do extraordinary things. This and not his inner need exclusively becomes the reason for another daring climb, the Walker. But already from the beginning of the climb Rand senses that he is lacking something

essential. He gives up.

When he comes back from the climb, he learns that Cabot has taken a bad fall on a climb and is in wheelchair now. Rand decides to leave Chamonix immediately. Before his return home he makes only one stop: to see his son and to say 'good-bye' to Catherin.

The first thing Rand does in the USA is to visit Cabot. Rand cannot come to terms with Cabot's injury and tries to cure Cabot in his own way. Unfortunately, his attempt is ineffective. Rand is devastated by such a turn of life and is greatly disillusioned with climbing: for fifteen years he has been trying to capture the essence of climbing and make it the cure for his inner unrest, but has never managed to.

Rand understands that climbing has been a false idol for him, and there may be things of more importance in life. But when Rand finally realizes this, he is spiritually spent and unable to start a new search for the meaning of life. He chooses to withdraw: at the end of the novel he runs a wreck-yard and is gradually turning into a spoken legend about a lonely climber seen in different places, appearing from nowhere and disappearing into nowhere.

### **The Landscape of Climbing**

The story-time in the novel covers approximately five years divided between the USA and France (no specific references are made as to how much time elapses in the respective country). The ratio of narrated time to narrating time is at times greatly disproportional, with up to a dozen pages devoted to a three day trip or a year being dismissed by a single phrase “another year has past,” depending on the importance and centrality of events.

The setting of the novel forms a frame, with the action starting and ending in the USA, but most events happen in Europe. The novel opens with the protagonist Vernon Rand doing odd jobs in LA, California. Both, the hot, stuffy place Rand is seen in, and Rand’s figure instil a sense of a pent-up potential, the aura of some force waiting to be set free. When it finally is, the action is transferred to France, mostly to Chamonix, the world’s Mecca of mountaineering. Several episodes take place in Paris and underpin the contrast between nature and civilization. Towards the close of the novel Rand returns to the USA, where at the end he is seen running a wreck-yard somewhere in a nameless town. This time the air is thick with depression and the feeling of a spent, rather than pent-up, strength.

Much attention is given to the authentication of the setting by a thorough placing of landmarks, and through vivid descriptions of landscapes, especially when Rand is seen in Chamonix. Yet the routes, mountains, and rock faces alluded to can be mainly identified only by the initiated audience: the North or the West Face of the Dru, the Central Pillar of Freney, the col de Rognon, etc. That is why explanations regarding major mountain sites, important facts and technical peculiarities are provided for the benefit of those less informed.

The Eiger serves as setting for some dramatic events in the novel. The emotional effect is strengthened by the tension resultant from the Eiger’s reputation as a cruel mountain, as it has become the setting for a number of tragedies in the history of the Alpine mountaineering:

The Eiger is the great wall of Europe. It exists in a class by itself. Six thousand feet high, [...]. Its color is black except for the snow which in winter clings everywhere, hiding the fields of ice. The climbing is difficult, the danger from storm and falling rock extreme.

The first attempts were all fatal though they forged the way. Men fell or froze to death, their bodies remaining on the face, grotesquely, for long periods

of time. In 1938 it was finally climbed. (112)

Such a depiction evokes the atmosphere of doom and peril around the climbers, as do many other landmarks mentioned in the novel, the description of which provides the readers with background information and intensifies the sense of human insignificance and mortality against the mountains.

From the very beginning, mountains are very special to Rand and constitute a world where everything is different: “a different kind of light, a different air” (22), the world where mountains *live*, and react to Rand’s presence by either accepting Rand and by revealing their secrets, or by being cruel and vicious. Yet the authorial voice warns that most probably the mountains are not quite what Rand thinks them to be.

There are two ways to view the ‘climber – mountain’ interrelation and to understand the philosophy in this regard. On the one hand, it is believed by quite a number of climbers that if one shows courage, the mountains will yield; if they sense fear, the consequence for a climber can be very tragic. On the other hand, nature and the mountains are neither kind, nor cruel, they are impartial. At the same time nature has a way of supporting and inspiring climbers and instilling in them a special feeling of closeness with the mountains. The mountains have the power to enchant and save, to respond to the inner emotions of the climber as well as to kill, but the latter is accepted as a probability and an occupational hazard for such a life-style. Apart from the protagonist, the influence of the mountains and the role of fear are shown on Love, a novice climber who awes Rand, a natural climber, and wants to establish the same connection with the mountains. He starts feeling how his lack of confidence is strengthened by the mountains and he loses the ground immediately.

On the one hand, the mountain is impartial: it cannot care less about the climber and his/her personality. But, on the other hand, it seems to amplify one’s stronger (though not necessarily better) features. If they are positive, a person survives and becomes spiritually purer. If they are negative or simply weak, the mountain has the power to either kill or destroy a person. Lionel Terray, one of the best known climbers of the mid-20th century, expressed this idea in a rather romantic key: “I began to realise that the mountain is no more than an indifferent wasteland of rock and ice with no other value than what we choose to give it, but that on this infinitely virgin material each man could mould, by the creative force of the spirit, the form of his own ideal” (Terray 56).

Rand personifies the mountain and after being defeated by it once, carries a deep-settled fear in his heart. Thus, when the protagonist finally touches the rock it



responds to him not as it used to, with warmth and compliance, but with silent resistance and ominous presence: “[t]he granite was dark and icy cold. Rand put his hand on it. It seemed he was touching not a face but something on the order of a planet, too vast to be imagined and at the same time, somehow, aware of his presence” (71).

From now on Rand begins to see a beast in the mountains. He constantly feels the hostility of the rock: Jack Cabot is hit by a loose stone; when Rand is looking for a ledge for them, he senses the rock’s unwillingness to be subdued: “he made his way upward, chilled by the malevolence of the wall, imagining it might shed him completely by merely letting loose the entire slab he held to” (76). This feeling of the utmost discomfort and fear is intensified in Rand later in the evening when he and Cabot are huddled together on a narrow ledge overnight, and when everything Rand used to live for starts to press upon him, yet nature remains very beautiful and, for that matter, even more indifferent. This juxtaposition of beauty and indifference strengthens Rand’s feeling of loneliness and non-belonging, non-acceptance by the rock, which Rand has never felt in the mountains before the infamous storm:

A feeling of intense isolation, a kind of claustrophobia came over Rand. It was as if he could not breathe, as if space were crushing him. He fought against it. He thought of where he was and of what might happen. The three cold stars in the belt of Orion shone above. His mind wandered. He thought of condemned men waiting out their last hours, days in California, his youth. His feet were cold, he tried to move his toes. Hours passed, periods of oblivion, of staring at the stars. There were more than he had ever seen. The coldness of the night increased them. They quivered in the thin air. On the dark horizon was the glow of Geneva, constant through the night. A meteor came down like a clot of white fire. An air-plane passed to the north. He felt resentment, despair. His eyes went down the wall, a thousand feet. He was falling, falling. (78)

From the first time the readers sees Rand in the mountains, he appears to be one with the rocks, an integral part of nature. But after the traumatic experience on the difficult climb Rand lacks the feeling of belonging, of being a part of the universe. Thus the notion of eternity, usually a positive one, now brings out a sense of eternal oblivion, when a person is seen as a part of the universe yet is so minuscule, blending with millions of similar ones, that he/she becomes devoid of any importance, turning into an absence rather than a presence. The same idea is expressed by Abe in *The Ascent* when he is thinks about the Everest region, its timelessness and vastness, and feels like lichens on a boundless surface.

The unity of oppositions in *Solo Faces* is continued by the coldness of the night, a negative notion, and the brightness of the stars, the symbols of purity, beauty, and

unrealizable dreams. The omnipresence of the duality of things is also evident in Rand's mingled thoughts of condemned men waiting out their last hours and the pleasant memories of his youth in California.

Rand and Cabot make it through the night only to face another challenge posed by nature: a thunderstorm, which can be deadly up on the wall. For a stronger impression on the reader the author implies some vicious intelligence of the storm making Rand feel exposed and haunted: "Rand felt helpless. He saw the storm approaching, coming up the valley like a blue wave with scud running before it. He sat watching it fearfully as if it might notice him, veer his way" (81). The atmosphere becomes even more tense when the storm takes on a beastly face and emanates the warning sounds "like the humming of bees" foreboding "blue-white snakes of voltage [...] writhing down the cracks" (82). The fear nestles in Rand's soul, and throughout the storm Rand "was clinging to his courage though it meant nothing. He could taste death in his mouth" (82). Rand sees everything in very dark colours. The grave atmosphere is further darkened by a picture of almost ghostly Cabot, who has turned from a friend into a burden. The feeling of despair is deepened by a short phrase "there were nine hours until dawn" (82).

Even after the storm has subsided, the sense of a threat does not leave Rand, for occasionally "there came breaks in the cloud when it was possible to see a little, even in darkness, and then the thick wave returned, in absolute silence, sweeping in as if to bury, to obliterate them" (83). Even at dawn after the storm has died away, Rand is still shivering from fear. He perceives the mountains as a very hostile place, as a beast and as his personal adversary against which Rand stands out as a lonely soldier foreseeing a lost battle, watching how "in the distance, like hostile armies, an endless line of black clouds was moving" (83). After such a trial the protagonist feels empty and the sun, suddenly appearing from the clouds, makes him feel even colder, as though being mocked by nature, especially when he touches the rock that used to be an open book to Rand, but has become "like the sides of a deep, sunken wreck" (84). Even the improvement of weather does not cheer Rand up: "[h]e felt a strange reversing of things. Instead of being encouraged, he felt drained, as in the final laps when, having given all, one is passed. A single thing sustained him: the summit was near" (84).

Through this and similar dramatic experiences Rand starts to see the mountains as adversaries with strong wills, adversaries able to instil fear in his soul. For example,

when he has to climb the Dru again in order to rescue stranded Italians, Rand is overcome by an uneasy feeling: “[t]he sky was black. They could see nothing below. The cold breath of the ice age rose to meet them. [...]. The Dru was dark and ominous, dusted with snow. Like a huge organ in a cathedral it seemed capable of deep, chilling tones” (138-39).

Rand loves the mountain for the fact that he has climbed it but feels strong resentment towards it for having shaken him so much. On the one hand, the protagonist sees the mountain is only a pile of rocks; on the other hand, it is personified in his eyes and plays a role of an enemy against whom Rand is waging a war: “At the base of the mountain, Rand looked up. From here it had lost its shape. Cold as steel, it seemed to rise on and on. Had he really climbed it? Had he climbed it twice? ‘Hello, you son of a bitch,’ he murmured” (140).

Rand’s feelings toward the Dru is quite different. He sees the Dru as a monster, a beast he must wage war against and defeat. He wants to revenge himself for his fears and for Cabot’s almost fatal fall: “[i]n his worn clothes and with his unshaven face he appeared to be a secondary figure, someone in the wake of failed campaigns. It did not matter. He would do it. He was not merely making an ascent. He was clinging to the side of this monster. He had his teeth in the great beast” (142).

A similar understanding of nature is presented in *The Ascent*, where Abe is keenly aware of the dangers posed by the landscape and where the mountain is predominantly seen as an enemy, a menacing presence and a monster preparing for a kill. But with time Rand manages to adopt a calmer attitude to the mountains and climbing, where he has no need to conquer them but rather to pay tribute to the mountains.

### **The Sublime**

The vivid images of snowy peaks and remote places make Rand pack and leave California and Louise without even looking back. He is moved by an impulse, an instinct of an animal knowing no loyalties other than the call of the wild. Soon he finds his reward – the sights that inspire a sense of awe and awake his feeling of the sublime:

There, at its end, unexpected, bathed in light, was the great peak of Europe, Mont Blanc. It was larger than one could imagine, and closer, covered in snow. That first immense image changed his life. It seemed to drown him, to rise with an infinite slowness like a wave above his head. There was nothing that could stand against it, nothing that could survive. (30)

Another character's feelings of exultation and transcendence can be viewed through the philosophy of the sublime, where the experience of the great is intensified by the danger, an agent producing the strongest emotions. The motif of the sublime as the result of the experience of the mountain recurs later in the book, where this perfect awareness of risk and the proximity of death seem to only add the intensity of feeling to the climbs: "'That's a terrific line,' he [Cabot] said, his eyes ascending one last time. 'It could take us right to the top, you know?' 'Or farther'" (66).

This admiration with the rock lines is consonant with the Burkean notion of the sublime that is caused by the broken, rugged surfaces and the depth, or height (see Burke 128). The great philosopher Immanuel Kant in his "Critique of Judgement" (1790) rhetorically asks about the aesthetic value of the mountains as a pure object of nature, compared to our idea of it: "[w]ho would call sublime, e.g., shapeless mountain masses piled in wild disorder upon one another with their pyramids of ice, [...]?" But here is Rand, overwhelmed by the sight of Mont Blanc: "[i]t was larger than one could imagine, and closer, covered in snow. That first immense image changed his [Rand's] life. It seemed to drown him, to rise with an infinite slowness like a wave above his head. There was nothing that could stand against it, nothing that could survive" (30).

This feeling of total awe is also described in relation to another character in *Solo Faces*, namely, Rand's chance acquaintance Love. A jumble of feelings well in him: the immeasurable sense of completion, "exultation beyond words" (40) but also anguish. For Love, the experience of the mountain and the feeling of the sublime are so intense and exciting that he does not even mind dying at this instant. He feels complete and in total unity with nature.

### **The Presentation of Character**

The story is mediated by an omniscient narrator with Rand being the centre of consciousness, the main focalizer, although the focalization is multiple<sup>32</sup> and occasionally shifts to reveal other characters' minds. Such an arbitrary shift in point of view is one of the reasons why criticism was directed at Salter. Additionally, the narrator's presence is constantly sensed through his intrusions to comment or explain, to provide necessary information or pass judgement on various topics. For instance, the authoritative voice is very strong in general remarks and is usually marked by the present tense, whereas the actual narration is in the past. The events are narrated as they occur with rare flashbacks or foreshadowings. Mostly, the flashbacks or foreshadowings "are not directly attributable to the narrator but filtered through the character's memories, fears, hopes" (Rimmon-Kenan 51).

From time to time the narrator shows that he has control over the story and possesses full knowledge of characters' thoughts, wishes and destinies. Occasionally, the narrator voices his own judgements, which is supposed to establish a certain paradigm of views, serving as a norm in the novel: "[w]omen look like one thing when you don't know them and another when you do" (14).

Rand is mostly described indirectly, through the eyes of the beholders, but such characterization is not very trustworthy, serving more for the reflexive characterization of the characters themselves. But on many occasions Rand's behaviour or the authorial comments<sup>33</sup> confirm the impressions of other figures. Rand, as seen in the context of post-modernism, is a character about whom no reliable information is offered, and other characters' judgements of him are as valid as those of the reader's. Thus, the reader has to "construct" Rand from the pieces of secondary characters' judgements about him and Rand's deeds, suggestive of certain traits, and only on rare occasions, does the authorial comment define Rand as well, e.g., "[b]ehind her [Louise] was someone tall and resigned. He hadn't yet learned that something always comes to save you" (16).

Gary's perspective, as well as that of a few other 'outsiders,' performs the function of constructing Rand's image from a myriad of individual impressions. For instance, Gary's opinion renders the perception of Rand by 'an average person' who

---

<sup>32</sup> Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes between fixed, variable and multiple focalization (see 78).

<sup>33</sup> Restricted omniscient narrative situation in *Solo Faces* is caused by the authorial narrator who leaves out so much that for some traits of character we depend on other characters' information.

does not really understand these free-spirited wanderers, yet feels inexplicably drawn by their mysterious world. For Gary, Rand belonged to a different world, “a world he [Gary] scorned and at the same time envied, men whose friend he would like to be, stories he would like to know” (5). Additionally, Rand appears to Gary a free, lonely wanderer, whom Gary remembers any time he sees “the dust following a lone pickup on a road through the field” (5).

Rand is also presented as seen through Louise’s eyes, where his external appearance is indicative of or tends to be associated with certain character traits: “[h]e had hair that had gone too long without being cut, fine nostrils, long legs. He was filled with a kind of freedom that was almost visible. She saw where he had been. He had crossed the country, slept in barns and fields, dry riverbeds” (12).

Rand’s previous experiences are only Louise’s assumption, which, nonetheless, proves well-justified in the course of the novel. Louise’s fear of Rand not staying long turns out well-grounded as well: to her Rand does not fit in the common world and is almost at war with it, “a figure in medieval battle, lost in the metal din” (26), an outcast.

Although Louise’s description of Rand carries less weight than that delivered by the authorial voice, it can be considered relatively objective and is later reinforced by other methods of character presentation. Louise, as well as Gary, can be called a ‘generalizing’ character, as it were, because her responses to Rand exemplify the more or less expected emotional response.

Rand’s image is then supplemented by Carol Cabot’s impressions, which function as the authentication or confirmation of the other characters’ opinions, through Carol’s position in the novel as a rather neutral character, suggesting a certain objectivity, though not complete reliability, of characterization: “[s]he had seen him only a few times and retained the image of someone tall, confident, someone with dirty hair and a kind of secret energy. Now he looked like an outlaw. He smelled of tree bark and smoke” (60). The next moment, Carol ascribes some divine aura to Rand who now “looks like some kind of holy man” (61). Carol’s husband, Jack, too, compares Rand to Natty Bumppo, the Deerslayer, which, to some extent, implies the idea of holiness acquired through his long time exposure to nature.

### **The Protagonist**

Vernon Rand is a young man of 25-26. There is no exact information about his age. The only other mention of the protagonist’s age is at the close of the novel, after a few years

of Rand's wanderings: the authorial voice mentions that "he was thirty – thirty-one if the truth be known" (174). Despite the omniscient narrative situation, reliable information about Rand is very scarce, which creates a sense of mystery around the protagonist. All that is known about Rand's past, is that he was born in Indianapolis, dropped out of college after a year of study and was drafted. He was fascinated by the army and wanted to become a lieutenant but ran into some troubles (again, no precise information) and had to leave, possibly desert. At some point Rand also worked as a guide in the Tetons, Wyoming. All this information is provided by Rand to other characters, and the reader is left wondering how reliable this information is.

The reader is also tricked into believing that 'Rand' is the protagonist's first name, and only well into the novel, on page 134, to be exact, Rand's actual first name, 'Vernon' is revealed. This distances the reader from the protagonist, creating the effect of impersonality. Both such a lack of information about Rand and his introverted manner create the aura of a myth, of freedom bordering on loneliness, of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, mixed with the painful feeling of not-belonging. He is seen as a self-marginalized seeker of his place in the universe and believes to have found it in the mountains, where climbing becomes the most important thing in his life. He belongs to

[a] breed of aimless wanderers [...] working as mason's helpers, carpenters, parking cars. They somehow keep a certain dignity, they are surprisingly unashamed. It's one thing to know their faces will become lined, their plain talk stupid, that they will be crushed in the end by those who stayed at school, bought land, practiced law. Still, they have an infuriating power, that of condemned men. They can talk to anybody, they can speak the truth. (5)

In order to climb, Rand gives up the things which could connect him to the ordinary world: school, jobs and relationships. Thus, Rand fits the cliché of a modern prodigy climber, for whom the activity turns to addiction and becomes the centre of his/her universe. Rand shows other attributes typical of the ultimate climber: extraordinary climbing skills, toughness, daring, qualities that make Rand a legendary figure wide outside mountaineering circles. Besides, Rand possesses the strength and dexterity of an animal, he is a loner whose home are the mountains. He is a noble outcast not willing to compromise his freedom, which he feels only mountains can give him. In search of it, Rand goes to the French Alps. Yet it is only after meeting Jack Cabot that Rand feels how much he has missed the vastness, the cold, the desolation, and the danger of the places so strongly contrasting with the warmth of California. Rand longs for a life in the mountains, with the primeval aspects of survival and death, cold and hunger attesting its

authenticity, and goes to Chamonix to look for the desired things.

When Rand comes to Chamonix he feels in his element. The town appears empty, but at the same time “he had a strange impression, almost a warning, that he knew this place. He looked about him as if to confirm some detail” (30). Rand rents a bunk in a shabby house, more resembling a den, which seems extremely depressing and frayed for an average person, especially on a rainy day, but Rand is perfectly at home and feeling alive to the fullest extent.

Nature plays a very important role in portraying the character of a climber, and one of the essential aspects of the presentation of a climber’s character is through his/her relation with the rocks, the manner of climbing and the approach to it. For Rand, for almost fifteen years there has been nothing more important than the mountains: neither a menacing rock face, nor the chill of its surface intimidates Rand, because he feels himself a part of nature, able to read the signs of the mountains. He feels very much at home on the rocks and equally estranged in society.

Rand is portrayed as an animal returning home. The image of an ‘animal,’ a ‘beast’ is commonly used to describe climbers, especially top climbers, and underline their superior skills and the outsider status often resulting from these very skills. The comparison to an animal also underlines the dominance of instincts and senses over logic and appropriateness. The choice of images is usually limited to the ones conveying the qualities associated with them or attributed to them, for example, the image of a wolf implying bravery, leadership, loneliness, the call of the wild; the image of a snake signifying dexterity and the feeling of the surroundings. To avoid the limitations of any particular kind a more general term of “animal” or “beast” is used. For example, Rand “was like an animal that has wintered somewhere, in the shadow of a hedgerow or barn, and one morning mud-stained and dazed, shakes itself and comes to life. Sitting there, he remembered past days, their glory. He remembered the thrill of height” (25).

In addition to the above mentioned implications, the image of an animal also evokes the idea of some primitive/primeval powers in the climber. Rand is,

like a beast that knows things by scent, he was untroubled, even at peace. The odor of the blankets, the trees, the earth, the odor of France seemed familiar to him. He lay there feeling not so much a physical calm as something even deeper, the throb of life itself. A decisive joy filled him, warmth and well-being. Nothing could buy these things – he was breathing quietly, the rain was falling – nothing could take their place. (31)



To an observer Rand's climbing seems very smooth and virtually effortless: "still in harmony with it, still undismayed – a movement one way, no good, another slightly different, this one successful. [...] He moved in smooth advances and pauses, even retreats, like a snake swallowing a frog" (39-40).

The dramatic effect of Rand's figure is reinforced through the image of a lonely wolf whose loneliness results from his exquisite strength and abilities, which make him admired but excluded, and oftentimes feared. On one occasion, for instance, Remy Giro, Rand's acquaintance, when introducing Rand to Henri Vigan, a Chamonix notoriety, describes him: "He's a wolf [...]. He lives a secret life, he travels alone. [...] An Alpha wolf. The leader" (90). Such comparison reveals Rand's uniqueness, his superiority over those well-adjusted to the enslavement by the society conventions. Rand bears the sign of the mountains, "the mark of a race that has transformed beyond that of the people of the plains" (Evola 6).

Yet Rand's connection with the rocks and nature, the meaning of his climbs are not quite what they look to others, or even to Rand himself. Mountains and wilderness are always seen as symbols of freedom, so are they also a metaphor of freedom and real life for Rand. But "[o]ne of the freedoms ardently desired by many extreme climbers, more so than by most of us, is freedom from fear. The wisest recognize that fear is a valuable tool for survival, but even in them there is often an inexorable pushing toward new extreme situations in which to overcome fear" (Lester 91).

Although like any climber Rand is not eager to admit to being frightened, the omniscient narrator describes the protagonist's feeling of anguish and his fear of the infinite powers of the mountain. It becomes evident that Rand has not broken the limitations of fear. A sudden storm on the Central Pillar of Freney almost kills Rand and leaves him deeply shattered. He does survive physically, but he comes back defeated, devastated by this life-and-death experience. Up on the mountain he seems to have touched something dark and cold, something chilling his soul. It seems that Rand has felt what Nietzsche warned about, namely "if you are looking into a precipice, the precipice is also looking into you". The storm has a very humbling effect on Rand. After the incident Rand develops a more detached attitude toward the peaks and climbs, as though he were a person who has peeped over the edge: "he began to look at them another way, without eagerness or confusion. There was a different sky above them, a sky that was calm, mysterious, its color the blue of last voyages" (54). For Rand this

experience on the mountain is the beginning of the end. He has lost some part of himself on the mountain, but this becomes evident only retrospectively.

Such an extended presentation of the climber's weaknesses is more typical for modern climbing literature, but the way Rand is portrayed as a noble mountaineer follows the tradition established by Shipton, Hillary, etc., who presented the mountaineer as a person experiencing fear but never being broken by it. Thus Rand sees his failure to find in the mountains what he has hoped for. Yet, he is resolved not to give up looking for it, and life seems to start favouring Rand again: "the back streets of town were his, the upper meadows, the airy peaks. It was the year when everything beckons, when one is finally loved" (89). Rand senses immense power in himself, he feels like both a god with the whole world at his feet and a part of this world at the same time (especially of the mountains):

Unknown sentinels stood distant, pale. He could have them, he had only to go forth. He was like the sun, touching remote peaks, they awoke to his presence. The thought of it made him reckless. He felt an immense strength. He saw an immortal image of himself high among the ridges – he was willing to die to achieve it. (89)

Through hard methodical work on the rocks Rand finds inner calmness. He feels the bond between himself and nature growing even stronger than before. Rand's attitude to mortality and to the interrelation between himself and the mountains as a struggle of wills is transformed into the perception of himself being in complete unity with the mountains. Through this realization Rand gets rid of any sense of fear and feels almost supernatural power welling in him, which enables him to accept what the mountains have prepared for him:

He became lost in the rhythm. The thought of slipping – he would have shot down the incline as if it were glass – first came to him only when he was far up, and it came in a strange way. He paused for a moment to rest. The tips of his crampons were driven in a fraction, barely half an inch – that half-inch would not fail. A kind of bliss came over him as he realized this, a feeling of invulnerability unlike anything he had known. It was as if the mountain had ordained him; he did not refuse it. (130-31)

All these aspects make Rand ecstatic, make him feel alive and content again, because he has lost any sense of trepidation and any fear of death. His extraordinary climbing abilities and the new experience make him feel like a super-human who defies his fears and expands the limits of the possible. The idea of danger or death does not frighten anymore but only tickles the nerve. The steepness which can be fatal is perversely attractive, "dazzling": "[h]e was happy, held there by the merest point of steel, above all

difficulties somehow, above all fear. This is how it must feel at the end, he thought uneasily, a surge of joy before the final moment” (131).

The same aspect of the feeling of exhilaration drawn from danger is reflected in *The Ascent*, where Daniel seems to know no fear in the most critical situations on the mountain and even get a kick from a potentially lethal fall.

Rand’s inability to find what he has been looking for in climbing with Cabot and in his relationships with women, especially Catherin, triggers an even stronger climbing obsession, which marks a new phase of his life. Rand climbs mostly solo, which, combined with his exceptional climbing skills, soon makes him a recluse, and “some sort of outlaw” (133) by the local guides’ standards. This authorial characterization of the protagonist is then followed by the perception of Rand through the eyes of another character, his temporary mistress from a quasi-bohemian Parisian circle: he falls asleep “like a vagabond in a barn” (152), he eats or sleeps when he feels like it, he is brilliantly unaware and uninterested in art, politics, etc., yet there is something in him that claims people’s attention. But being an outlaw and a vagabond somehow adds to Rand’s purity, some childish innocence radiating from him. Exactly so does he appear to the stranded Italians whom he rescues: somebody “tall, weary, a childish grin on his face – such was the image that incredibly rose from the void” (145).

The aura of sainthood, hinted at through the comments of some characters, is strengthened by a direct characterization from the omniscient perspective through some evaluative adjectives, for instance, “that worn, angelic face” (148). The narrative voice describes Rand in a way that suggests not only an angelic or prophetic inner self but also pure-spirited savageness, which, in this case, is the synonym of genuineness: “[f]or two hundred years France had held the idea of the noble savage, simple, true. Unexpectedly he had appeared. His image cleansed the air like rain. He was the envoy of a breed one had forgotten, generous, unafraid, with a saintly smile and the vascular system of a marathon runner” (149).

Yet the qualities Rand is admired for underline his otherness and make it impossible for him to find a place within society. He is somehow totally inapt to adapt to the social standards and expectations. The protagonist is driven by his wishes and instincts, and, from a common perspective, he is driven down. Rand’s Parisian mistress, Colette, becomes ‘the voice of the crowd’ and predicts an infamous end for Rand:

“There’s no question, though, where he is going. He knows exactly.”  
 “Where is that?”

“Oblivion,” she said. It was not so much a prophecy as a dismissal. She was casting him out of their lives. He would wander elsewhere, exiled, a vanished figure. (160)

Rand follows the forecast course: after leaving Colette and spending a few days with Simone, Colette’s friend, he starts moving downward, partially because he does not quite know where he wants to end up, or it does not matter where he will: “[h]e was drifting downward, from the world of cafes and lights to another of dismal streets and long walks home after midnight when the Metro had closed, a city of chance encounters in the company of a strange girl he first saw outside American Express who also had no place of her own” (161).

A row of nameless, faceless acquaintances, senseless parties and events now make up Rand’s life. Soon a moment comes when he is overcome by the feelings of disgust. At this moment he remembers the mountains again, his saving grace, and Rand believes that if he climbs one more mountain everything will turn right.<sup>34</sup> At this thought, the image of Chamonix fills Rand’s mind with comfort: “He thought of Chamonix and the clear morning air, standing in the station, the weight of a pack upon him and the solemn, reassuring clank of metal from the bandolier of it hung on his shoulder. Here [in Paris], hardships were misfortunes; there, it was the flavor of life” (163).

Many climbers are seen to harbour a belief that climbing is the answer to life problems, which leads to additional disillusionments (Beck Weathers from *Left for Dead*, Daniel from *The Ascent*, Sankey from *Climbers*, Artemis Phillips from *Beyond the Mountain*, etc.). Thus Rand, despite reaching a high level of connection with the mountains still feels that he is lacking something significant, the essence of climbing, “the profound dimension of the spirit” (Evola 6), some *inner* awareness of the mountain, the feeling of being totally in place. Rand’s entire climbing seems to be a subconscious search for this enlightenment, the reflection of which he saw in some climber’s face fifteen years before:

He remembered seeing another climber, older, in his twenties, rolled-up sleeves, worn shoes, an image of strength and experience. Now, with absolute clarity, he saw that climber again, his face, his gestures, even the very light. It seemed that in spite of all that happened in between, the essence, an essence he had seen so vividly in that unknown face still somehow eluded him and he was struggling again, still, to capture it. (168)

---

<sup>34</sup> The same tendency is reflected in *The Ascent*, where Daniel seems to believe that if he climbs Everest along a specific route and has Abe as a rope-partner, he will be able to get rid of his inner demons.

One of Rand's attempts to capture the essence of climbing which has been eluding him, is on the Walker,<sup>35</sup> the climb that has been haunting the protagonist for a long time. But Rand is psychologically not ready for the Walker, there is no *inner need* to match skills and strength with it. So, on the climb "he began to scramble over easy rocks, not thinking far ahead, emptied soon of everything except the warmth of movement. [...] He was climbing poorly, making mistakes" (174-75). After a short time, he becomes chastened and "in a corner of his mind he was already abandoning the attempt" (175). Rand's mind becomes his main adversary, fear snatching the ground from under his feet, and as always, the mountain only amplifies the dominant emotion:

He was nervous, frightened. He had begun to lose belief in the possibility of going on. The long vertical reaches beneath him were pulling at his feet. Suddenly he saw that he could be killed, that he was only a speck. His chest was empty, he kept swallowing. He was ready to turn back. The rock was implacable; if he lost his concentration, his will, it would not allow him to remain. (176)

Such thoughts make Rand feel even more crestfallen than he has been before, and he gives up the climb yet again with "the resignation of one condemned" (177).

Rand explains this defeat on the Walker by his lack of courage (see 178). Yet the aspect of Rand's fear is a very complex one: Rand is not afraid of dying. He accepts death as a possible result of climbing and, for example, rarely grieves over the death of his friend and climbing partner Bray.<sup>36</sup> Rand has the same understanding of his own possible death: "[h]e had no fear of dying, there was no such thing, there was only changing form, entering the legend he was already part of" (210-11). But Rand's fear is caused by his sudden realization that climbing has ceased to matter. He has yet again failed to capture the essence of climbing, and instead has awoken to the fact that there may be more important things in life. The belief that by climbing another mountain everything can be put right suddenly turns into a fallacy. In the end, Rand confesses to Cabot: "'It [climbing] was the most important thing in my life. It was the only thing. I sacrificed everything to it. Do you know the one thing I learned about climbing? The one single thing?' 'What?' 'It is of no importance whatsoever'" (198).

Rand also comes to a conclusion that "the real struggle comes afterward" (198), and he, finding himself in the middle of this struggle, feels not only disillusioned but also betrayed: by himself, because he has surrendered; by Cabot, who seems to have

---

<sup>35</sup> The Walker Spur is a route leading to the Pointe Walker, one of the major buttresses on the Grandes Jorasses, a mountain in the Mont Blanc range. This is one of the classic alpine north faces famous for its difficulties and toughness.

<sup>36</sup> John Bray falls to his death while attempting the Eiger with Cabot.

given up after his injury; by the mountains, where he has lost more than he has found. Rand feels broken and cheated because life is passing him by: he has given about fifteen years to the mountains but is left with nothing, whereas others have houses, families, jobs. He starts remembering trivial scenes which have always seemed so depressing to him and which have suddenly acquired immense significance. At the same time there is a presentiment that, given another chance, he would have made the same choices. But the protagonist cannot help feeling bitter, because he has turned into somebody he thought he would never be. Rand has always defined himself through the mountains, and when they have ceased to matter. He tries to redefine himself through other aspects of life but they are missing, discarded, dismissed as limiting his freedom, as too trivial or materialistic: a house, a job, a family, friends, a social position: “[h]e saw himself in the mirror, past the life of which he was the purest exemplar, which he thought would never spoil. He was suddenly too old. His face was one he once would have scorned. He was facing winter now, without a coat, without a place to rest” (210).

Rand sees that “his world had come apart” (210) and he is not to find the harmony he has been looking for. Despite feeling greatly disillusioned, Rand still sees the mountains as home and as bearers of his legend:

There were many stories. A climber was seen alone, high up on Half Dome or camping by himself in the silent meadows above Yosemite. He was seen one summer in Baja California and again at Tahquitz. For several years there was someone resembling him in Morrison, Colorado – tall elusive, living in a cabin a few miles outside of town. But after a while he, too, moved on. [...] They talked of him, however, which was what he had always wanted. The acts themselves are surpassed but the singular figure lives on. The day finally came when they realized they would never know for certain. Rand had somehow succeeded. He had found the great river. He was gone. (211)

Never again is Rand known to visit or contact Cabot or his acquaintances in any way. Rand disappears from the horizon, and though still living he seems to be gone from life, or life is gone from him. Rand’s wrecked spiritual state is underlined by his taking up a job to run a wreck yard for a man in Pensacola, in no one’s land. To an outsider, Rand appears as if “recovering from something, an illness, a wound” (216), but there is no great optimism about him getting over this particular wound, which has left Rand too shattered. It is understood that Rand will never return to the mountains because of his belief that once something is over, it is over. He does not want “to live again anything he ha[s] already lived” (217).

### **Other Climbing Characters**

Rand is the central figure in the novel, but there are other alpinist characters described, who complement the picture of a climber. Besides, Rand as a climber is presented not only through his actions and thoughts but also through his interrelations with his climbing companions Jack Cabot, and Rand with John Bray.

Jack Cabot is an accomplished climber and Rand's potential rival, but their climbing companionship is much stronger than Rand's relationship to his girlfriend Catherin, or Cabot's bond to his wife Carol. After a long break Jack finds Rand in Chamonix, and both are so overjoyed that everything else seems to lose significance, and when Cabot is with Rand he never even turns to see where Carol has gone. The meeting of the two is almost a declaration of love, even if hidden behind a few simple words like "I've been waiting for you" (63) or "there are certain climbs I wouldn't want you to do without me" (62).

Jack represents a different type of a prodigy climber than Rand (although the main characteristics are the same): apart from inevitable features like strength, exceptional climbing skills and daring, he is very easy-going, always light-hearted and sometimes light-headed; occasionally he does not mind putting a toe across the line. Unlike Rand who is seen as a 'mysterious hero' or a 'prophet' with the feeling of dignity, Cabot is a cheerful vagabond dreaming of becoming famous. Cabot differs from Rand in many ways, but they have the same climbing ambitions and are haunted by the same climbs. In climbing, "a deep companionship and understanding joined them. They were equals. Without a word, it seemed they had made a solemn pact. It would never be broken" (70). This pact is further sealed by a shared life-and-death experience on the Dru during a thunderstorm. Yet the feelings of connection and commitment suffer a heavy blow when Rand incidentally finds out that Cabot is planning a winter ascent of the Eiger, but Rand is not invited to join. Cabot is understood to keep Rand unawares because he wants to have the media film the climb, and knows in advance that Rand would not accept it. Although the protagonist accepts Cabot's decision, he feels completely devastated, "as if he had been slapped in the face" (98).

Such an incident seems to be enough to make Rand hate Cabot or at least not care about his fate. But when one night Rand has a nightmare about Cabot dying, he is shattered: "suddenly he was felled by grief, knocked to his knees. He was weeping unashamedly" (111). When a few months later Rand hears that Cabot has taken a bad fall, he feels crashed, devastated by the fact and by its implications. Cabot's accident,

combined with Rand's failed attempt to climb the Walker, seem to play a fatal role in the protagonist's life, though at that time he "was not sure what he felt, if he was merely nervous and depressed or if the curve of life itself had turned downward" (180). Affected by the events and news Rand decides to return home, and the first thing he does in the USA is to visit Jack Cabot. Rand feels that his mission is to help Cabot recover.

Another climbing character presented in *Solo Faces* is John Bray. Unlike Vernon Rand and Jack Cabot, he is only an average climber. He is very skilled but seems to be lacking the absolute confidence in his abilities and daring, so necessary to for a prodigy mountaineer. The authorial comment describes Bray as somebody who "hadn't the imagination which is indispensable to greatness. Supreme climbs need more than courage, they need inspiration. He was a sergeant in the ranks – perhaps in tumultuous times, he might be a colonel, one who wears his blouse unbuttoned and gets drunk with the men" (97).

These are the qualities that get Bray on Cabot's team for the winter climb of the Eiger: he possesses sufficient technique but unlike Rand he will never question Cabot's authority and decisions; neither will he claim the position of a leader. At first Bray feels very honoured by this invitation. Soon, however, he becomes more critical of Cabot's reasons for doing the Eiger and his habit of pushing others beyond their limits. He starts to dislike Cabot's climbing ethics, his disregard for team-mates' opinions, for the physical condition of the partners and for team priorities. Unfortunately Bray is hesitant to voice his dissatisfaction or leave the team. He is killed on the route a short time later.

The presentation of the character of the climber is also done through his/her way of coping with climbing accidents. In *Solo Faces* there are two such instances: Rand tries to grasp the death of Bray and to come to terms with Cabot's fall that has left his friend crippled. The former is presented mostly from Rand's point of view and reveals his philosophical approach to the death while climbing (see "Climbing Philosophy": Rand feels Bray's supernatural presence).

The latter is shown through the shifting perspective of Rand, Cabot, and the authorial point of view in the attempt to capture the responses of both the injured climber and his partner. Cabot is trying to 'drink' his paralysis in alcohol, on the one hand, but he is also trying to cope with the loss of his physical ability in every possible



way: “[h]e prayed to God, he’d read poetry, philosophy, trying to force his life into a new shape” (193). His attempts, however, are only partially successful, the night stealing the day’s little victories: “[d]uring the day it seemed to work, but at night it was different, it all leaked away and he was a boy again imagining the world and what he would do in it, except that his legs lay limp as rags” (194).

There is also a point when Cabot thinks of shooting himself. But Rand thinks that Cabot has accepted his lot too quickly and too easily. It is Rand who cannot come to terms with Cabot’s disability, but he suffers even more at the realization of his own powerlessness to cure Cabot’s injury. Rand spends quite a long time with Cabot but still cannot, or does not want to believe that Cabot is a cripple. With time Rand comes to suspect that Cabot is using his condition as a disguise: “[i]t was as if he [Cabot] might stand up at any moment, discarding his incapacity like throwing off a blanket. Sometimes he actually seemed on the very point of rising and then, as if warned, he relented” (198).

Because Rand has lost his courage, he needs to see that at least Cabot has not given up his struggle and there is hope for both of them. Unfortunately, what he sees is Cabot comfortably hiding in his wheelchair, masking his unwillingness to climb by his inability, as it is interpreted by Rand.

In the given case Cabot, despite his injury, is in a more favourable situation: he has a perfect excuse not to climb, even for himself. Rand, on the other hand, is persuaded that the only thing keeping Cabot in the wheelchair is the disillusionment they share in the ideal world of the mountains, where climbing as the sense of life has merely turned out to be *fata morgana*.

Rand explains his theory to Cabot, his main argument being that judging from a doctor’s words there is nothing physically wrong with Cabot. Something else is keeping him in the wheelchair, and this something is the lost courage. Rand’s point of view is that “[i]f you’ve lost your courage, you’ve lost everything. It doesn’t matter after that” (201), there is no reason to live further. For Rand the picture of paralyzed Cabot is so traumatic that he turns to rather dramatic measures in his desire to undo the outcome of the accident. Rand decides to check whether his friend has really lost his courage with the help of the Russian roulette. Cabot is up for the game, proving he still has courage, but he will not walk, not even at gun point. It is reasonable to assume that Rand has decided that he and Jack will die, if they both have given up and lost their courage. The motif of a climber committing a suicide or a merciful killing of a partner who cannot

climb any longer surfaces in a number of texts and is based on reality. Vernon Rand's prototype, Gary Hemming, put a bullet through his head in 1969. A suicide of a climber figures in a story Rand is told on a party, in Gordon Thompson's short story "Children Like Climbers Often Fall" (Salked, Smith 167-173), in John Harrison's *Climbers*, etc. In 2000, an avid American climber and a writer Guy Waterman chose to freeze to death on the top of his favourite mountain. Waterman's failing climbing abilities and ageing are hinted at as probable explanations for the suicide. It is rumoured that one of his sons, who died in the mountains as well, had not planned to return from his last climb.

For Rand the feeling of partnership is so strong (even if he has been climbing alone for a long time) that life without a possibility of climbing with Cabot again has no meaning. The accusation sounds in Rand's remark concerning Cabot's condition: "And if you've given up, where does that leave me?" (199). From this perspective, for Rand the question is not "how to reshape the life after the fall?" but rather "who should shoot who?" (204).

### **Susceptibility to Superstitions**

Climbing is a dangerous activity, and a chance plays a very important role in the sport because mountaineers have very little control over a sudden storm, a death from a stone fall or an avalanche. Such a constant exposure to the natural elements and a lack of control over them provide a fertile ground for superstitions. As a result, climbers tend to be more susceptible to various omens and often establish cause-effect correlations between their actions and the instances of natural violence.

Thus when Rand has a nightmare before a challenging climb, he expects something bad to happen on the route and feels that the magic has left him and he has lost the connection with the rock. Undoubtedly, a bad dream can be a result of the constant pressure and of Rand's fears related to climbing, but the protagonist believes his dreams are a flash-forward with an ominous meaning:

There followed hours and hours of the same thoughts repeated again and again. The dark face of the mountain filled not only sleeplessness but the entire world. Its coldness, its hidden terrors would be revealed only at certain times. Long before dawn he lay, victim of these fears. The iron hours before the assault. His eyes were already wearied by images of what was to come, the miraculous had drained from his palms. (67)

Bad dreams melt in the first sunrays, but in the morning Rand is still lacking confidence and the desire to climb. He feels hollow, burned out, almost like a ghost: "[h]is chest

felt empty, his hands weightless. He felt a lack of density, the strength to cling to existence, to remain on earth, as if he were already a kind of husk that could blow away” (68). The fact that Rand has the ablest partner for the climb he can wish, his best friend Jack Cabot, does not seem to comfort him much. On the climb, “Rand could feel a premonition, a kind of despair becoming greater, flooding him” (80), and the protagonist’s belief in superstitions is only confirmed by Cabot’s near-fatal fall.

On the other hand, as soon as Rand starts to feel more amicably towards the mountains, he senses that they yield, thus displaying their supernatural response to him.

### **Climbing Philosophy**

Rand's climbing philosophy goes through a number of transformations in the course of the novel. The first time he is seen climbing in Chamonix, he seems totally at home and is overwhelmed by the feeling of the sublime; he imagines that the mountains accept him, beckon to him. At this point, the protagonist senses a very strong bond to the mountains and hopes that here he can find a revelation, enlightenment he once saw in the face of another climber.

Rand is happy in the mountains because of his skills and a light-hearted confidence that nothing can defeat him, that he is a match to the mountains, though he realizes the objective dangers of the climb. But the mountains prove to be much more powerful than Rand has expected. After Rand's solo attempt of the Freney Pillar and the menacing storm, he starts to believe that mountains are living and thinking beings. They become Rand's antagonists, beasts waiting to kill. It is in the mountains that the protagonist suffers his biggest losses, his friends and his faith becoming their victims. Yet such losses make Rand reassess his vision of human mortality and his conception of the mountains. Thus, when John Bray falls to his death, Rand is devastated but with time he stops grieving over his friend because he starts to feel Bray's presence in the mountains. In this light John's death seems to Rand less grave and now Rand believes that mortality is a mode of being rather than non-being: "[h]e thought of Bray. For a moment it was as if he were there. These lonely faces, these days, were still his, he existed in them. Broken and dead, he was not gone. He had not disappeared, only stepped offstage" (131).

Through Cabot's 'betrayal,' Bray's death and through his return to the mountains after Paris, Rand reassesses his place in the world, the meaning and the essentials of existence. The come-back seems to enlighten Rand in the meaning of climbing: from now on he does not need to conquer the mountains, or to fight the rocks. He experiences spiritual calmness, because he finally feels accepted by the mountains:

It was not only solitude that had changed him but a different understanding. What mattered was to be a part of existence, not to possess it. He still knew the anguish of perilous climbs, but he knew it in another way. It was a tribute; he was willing to pay it. A secret pleasure filled him. He was envious of no one. He was neither arrogant nor shy. (131-32)

Through such experiences Rand's vision is changed from seeing himself as a match to the mountains, through the realization of his smallness and insignificance against such a

vast entity, through the stage of paralyzing fear, to the acceptance of human mortality as a different quality of existence. He becomes aware of the mountains as a part of himself, and, respectively, of himself as a part of the mountains, as a hero of myths about the mountains.

It seems as though Rand has finally managed “to reach certain existential peaks at which ‘living more’ (*mehr leben*), or the highest intensity of life, is transformed into ‘more than living’ (*mehr als leben*)” (Evola 5).<sup>37</sup> The mountains awaken a sense of spirituality in Rand, show him the light at the end of the tunnel. Rand feels that through mountain climbing he reaffirms life and achieves inner calmness. He owes them for the vision of transience and yet interconnectedness of things, where death is not the end of being, and where the love of mountains is a form of the love of life.

The essential element for the emergence of such a feeling of affinity with the mountains is the defeat of his inner fears. Rand believes that the mountains amplify the strongest emotions a person is experiencing, thus, fearlessness enables one to survive in the mountains, even more than skills. Such a survival, physical as well as psychological, is the reaffirmation of life, the victory over himself. Rand is grateful for the experience of the mountains, and he sees his every next climb, especially the rescue of the Italians as paying respect to the mountains. As he explains to the reporters, “it wasn’t the act of heroism. It was more a debt I owed the mountains” (147), and this understanding becomes the source of a still greater confidence:

“Nothing actually protects you. [...] It comes from within. [...] It’s not like gambling. It’s not a matter of taking chances.” They assumed that a climber is courageous, that like a boxer there is latent in him the strength to kill. “You are prepared for everything. [...] If your foot slips you have your hand. You never try something unless you’re sure you can do it. It’s a question of spirit. You have to feel you’ll never come off.” (151)

Unfortunately, soon the disillusionment comes: Rand has done everything but he is still unhappy. Rand has not found the revelation he has been looking for and climbing does not seem to matter any longer. Moreover, he has come to realize that there is life outside climbing, the life he has always resented. Now the protagonist seems suspended between the two worlds: the world of mountains and the ordinary world. He does not belong to any of them because he has become disillusioned in climbing but has very few connection points in life outside climbing.

---

<sup>37</sup> Evola summarises Simmel’s philosophical notions, which to a certain extent draw on those of Nietzsche.

### **Spiritual Corruption**

*Solo Faces* presents the influence of society on mountaineering as a problematic issue through Rand's desire to find a spiritual refuge in the mountains representing spiritual purity and being true to oneself. In Rand's view the mountains yield a counterbalancing force to the hypocrisy and superficiality of modern society. Rand tries to oppose the deterioration of the moral values of mountaineering in his own way: by avoiding the media attention and disclosing very little information about his climbs. Yet to be true to such a simple principle turns out to be more complicated than it seems, and the media begin their pernicious influence on the close-to-perfect world of Rand and Cabot. The yearning for fame, in Rand's case unacknowledged, has penetrated both friends. With the help of a famous reporter the climb on the West Face of the Dru becomes a turning point in the friends' lives after which "glory fell on them lightly like the cool of the evening itself" (86). Cabot feels drunk with the fame and handshakes of climbing celebrities, Noyer<sup>38</sup> among them, who was famous like Lachenal and Terray.<sup>39</sup>

The media are usually seen as a great means of creating a public opinion and of promoting interest, but they can also be dangerous and make one dependent. The media as a significant part of modern reality play a fatal role in the lives of Cabot and some other climbers, to a lesser extent in Rand's life, for he does not seem to care much about such things. The fame does not add value to the climbs for him, and for a time Rand seems absolutely uncorrupted by glory and publicity, remaining a lonely figure nonconforming to the common values of modern society. But his keeping distant and silent about his experience on other climbs only contributes to a greater mystery around him:

He was famous, or nearly. There was a tent, people knew, somewhere back in the trees where like a fugitive he had a few possessions, those he needed, rope strewn in dense coils at his feet, heaps of pitons, boots. Almost less than ever was known about him now. There were stories that missed him completely, like confused shots fired in the dark. (88)

Though Rand tries to disregard the media factor, he is not completely devoid of vanity: "the newspaper clippings were folded and put away. He pretended to scorn them. He kept them despite himself" (89). Moreover, his reason of avoiding the media attention is rather vain in itself: Rand wants to be a legend and his avoiding public attention has mainly to do with his understanding of the essence of legend: "the true form of legend,

---

<sup>38</sup> Most probably a fictional climbing notoriety.

<sup>39</sup> Frenchmen Louis Lachenal and Lionel Terray are ones of the greatest climbers of the 1950s. Lachenal was the first with Maurice Herzog to climb the summit of more than 8,000m in 1950.

he believed, was spoken. He did not want to be catalogued, he said, read and discarded like sports scores and crimes” (89). Precisely for this reason he does not want to speak too much about his and Cabot’s climb on the Dru. The only thing he wants to be known about the climb is that they have done it and “let them [people] imagine the rest” (89).

Rand has mixed feelings about being famous: on the one hand, he subconsciously yearns for it; on the other hand, he understands that notoriety will somehow diminish the value of what has been done: “[w]hat he had done, what he would do, he did not want explained. Something was lost that way. The things that were of greatest value, that he had paid so much for, were his alone” (90).

The ambiguity of Rand’s attitude to being famous takes on a different shape when he is invited to one of the parties of the Chamonix upper society. Rand seems to despise the ‘insiders,’ nonetheless he comes to the party and stays. In some way he wants to prove his superiority to this coterie of self-important yet, to him, faceless people. Rand seems to take a personal issue with those belonging to the circle, and, though he has never wanted to be one of them, he still feels the urge to somehow avenge himself for all his moments of misery, even if he is solely responsible for the life he has chosen:

Confident faces, unrecallable names. The guests were scattered in groups through the house. Some seemed to know him, at least who he was, others not to care. They were talking, laughing, at ease. All this had existed when he was sweeping floors up behind the Hotel Roma, when he fell into bed at Christmas drunk from a bottle of wine. He wanted to avenge himself. He could not be had so cheaply. He was not theirs for a handshake and a compliment. (91)

Rand tells himself that he will not sell himself and his beliefs, yet there is a feeling he is doing it by entertaining people he actually despises, telling them climbing stories in order to promote his image.

Another aspect of the malign influence of fame and the media surfaces during Cabot’s expedition to the Eiger, where commercialisation and the search for public approval lead to a tragedy. In this respect, the novel voices many concerns of the climbing world and numerous happenings in the novel draw on true events from the mountaineering scene. One of the most prominent examples is Cabot’s haunted climb: the winter ascent of the Eiger. The ascent is to be documented by the BBC, so the climbers, especially the leader, are under a considerable external pressure.<sup>40</sup> Success

---

<sup>40</sup>Also Rand’s failure on the Walker seems to be influenced by an outside factor represented by the media. Pressure is created by Rand’s awareness and concern, even if concealed or subconscious, that he *is expected* to do extraordinary things.

will open new possibilities and will help to finance new climbs. But something goes wrong on the climb and one of the climbers, John Bray, falls to his death when a fixed rope breaks. It is described as an accident, but one that could have been avoided.

This episode seems to be loosely based on the actual events on the Eiger Wall in 1966, when an Anglo-American team (John Harlin, Dougal Haston, Layton Kor) attempted a climb which had been a haunted climb, at least for John Harlin. The group was under a close scrutiny of the press and tried to do their best to summit the Eiger. It would provide funds and reputation needed for the organization of the Everest expedition. During the climb John Harlin fell to his death when a fixed rope broke (Roth 271).

The accident acquires a greater significance in the novel in terms of parallels between fiction and non-fiction, including the aspect of fame and the media. There is a hint at hurt feelings between Cabot, Bray and Rand in the novel, and between Harlin and Gary Hemming (the prototype of Vernon Rand) in reality. Thus, what is said about the actual events can also be applied to the fictional ones: at some point Harlin hoped that Gary Hemming would become a member of the Eiger assault team but Hemming “had left, some say because he was jealous of all the attention being paid to Harlin” (Roth 234). It is Cabot who is most eager to see the summit. His desire is so strong that even broken bones cannot stop him. The only problem is that his companions do not feel the same about the climb, and Cabot fails to see it.

When Rand finds out about the plans for the Eiger he feels jealous of Bray and betrayed by Cabot, who according to his belief, has been his best friend yet has asked somebody else to join in one of the haunted climbs. Cabot gives up a number of his principles while doing the Eiger: he is doing it to make himself famous, and the presence of the cameras puts additional pressure on the group. He also breaks his promise to Rand about climbing the wall together because he understands that Rand will not have the climb filmed. Thus, from the very beginning the important climb is corrupt: “[s]omething had been sacrificed in the way it all was arranged. The climb was not classic – it was, in a sense, corrupt. The conquest of heights by any means and for whatever purpose is questionable” (115).

Cabot realizes that he is doing something wrong, but he chooses to proceed. The authorial remark about the dubiousness of the Machiavellian principle in Cabot’s actions foreshadows a punishment for Cabot. There is a moment when everything can still be reversed or cancelled under many pretexts: bad weather conditions, general



fatigue and the lack of drive in the team, but “the involvement was already too great and Cabot was too compelling a figure. He was the kind of man who did not conform to standards, he created them” (116). Cabot is under pressure to finish the climb during a window of good weather so that everything can be filmed, and he is demanding much from his team-mates. Climbing for the wrong reasons puts a mark on the quality of the climb and on the relation between climbers.

The attempt to climb the Eiger results in Bray’s death. The accident is wrapped in the words suggesting a tragic incident: “[p]erhaps the rope had been worn against the ice. Perhaps a rock had cut it. No one would ever know” (118). Nevertheless, Cabot’s mercantile drives are brought in direct cause-effect correlation to the tragedy. On the one hand, the reader is being persuaded into ‘the tragic incident’ version. On the other hand, though Cabot bears no legal responsibility for Bray’s death, it is understood that he is morally responsible for it. Such a feeling of a wrongdoing is presented in the writings of a prominent British mountaineer, Joe Simpson, and is explained through the notion of the natural law. Simpson implies that the mountains strengthen the sense of the natural law in a person, thus making a person spiritually purer, whereas society morally corrupts people inconspicuously, substituting true values for the false ones:

We have no need of codes by which to judge our ethical response to situations. We know intuitively which is the correct way to behave. In our hearts we know what works best for everyone. To ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ is a precept that everyone understands and most communities follow. So what happens when we begin to grow careless, selfish, or wilfully ignore what we know to be natural and right? The society in which we exist becomes increasingly cynical and the lives we live dishonest, almost without us knowing it, until it is almost too late to reverse the trend. (Simpson 74)

Spiritual corruption is also punished in *The Ascent*, where a betrayer pays a high price for a moral wrong-doing.

Rand, like Cabot, is being tried by the fame: after having performed the incredible rescue of the stranded Italians on the Dru Rand becomes instantly famous, his photographs are in every European paper. He tries to disappear and to avoid interviews and photo sessions, yet does it only to become the type of legend he has imagined: “he did not want to talk to any reporters. He wanted the pleasure of being notorious, unknown” (147). But when he is caught by the limelight he feels surprisingly natural in it, not entirely displeased with having been caught by the press. Yet for a time, Rand, unlike Cabot, does not seem to be tainted by the media attention. But gradually he seems to soil himself with society’s vices. He betrays his own principles regarding the

media and sells the rights to photographs of the rescue; he is being insincere by entertaining the crowd of talkative, well dressed journalists, women, businessmen with carved out lives (see 150): “Paris and triumph. In his pocket were two thousand francs for the rights to photographs of the rescue. How easily it had come” (151). But this is only the beginning of the fall, the first stage of which is directed by a Parisian society woman, Colette, who soon becomes Rand’s mistress. In the comfort of Colette’s attention Rand grows “lazy, basking in the warmth of self-approval without the ability to judge things for himself” (152). He is still vacillating between going public and remaining a mystery: on the one hand, his foolish article has appeared in the paper, but, on the other hand, he has turned down the offers to do advertising. Colette disapproves of his turning such a promising offer down, but “it was against his principles, he said quietly. It was not only against his principles but more, it was something he despised” (153). With time, however, he concedes to Colette’s reasoning that people know anyways that he is accepting a little money. Thus, by and by, Rand becomes the victim of spiritual corruption, of the betrayal of the self and his philosophy. He gives up his principles only on the pretext that in ten years nobody will know the difference. Rand’s last argument “and if it’s only me?” is dismissed by Colette’s answer: “the only trouble, with your habits, you may not be here” (153). This is the point when Rand realizes that “she was the world [...] and he an outsider” (153), and if Rand wants to achieve something in the world he must yield to its rules, to adopt society’s value system, even if he despises these things. Colette becomes a promise of a good life because of her position and power in society. Rand, like Cabot, has sold himself and his ideals, and soon “the illusion of distant traveller was vanishing. Concession was on his shoulders” (153). Rand discards his identity and adopts everything that makes up his mistress: her taste, her friends, her telephone, her way of life. Even then he sometimes longs for a simpler life, but such thoughts are transient until a day when Rand feels that he will be irrevocably ruined should he stay in Paris a day longer. He turns his glance to the mountains again.

Rand manages to find a temporary refuge from the world in Chamonix, but it does not last long. He is annoyed by constant scrutiny and, even if he does not want to admit it, is weighed down by public expectations, but does not feel up to the challenge of meeting them.

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

The images employed to characterise the protagonist in *Solo Faces* form the concept of 'a noble outcast,' an idealist who decides to withdraw himself from society where "everyone lies, fakes" (12). Rand also feels alienated from civilization where he sees nothing but "illness of lives that were spent" (11). This cursory remark voices the concern with the effects of modern society on the individual and with the mediocrity of the lives of over-civilized humanoids (Vause 12). It is evident that Rand does not really deem himself a part of such a life. He neither has, nor wants any anchors to it, save for some temporary stances, like a number of his fleeting relationships. But Rand's aim is to find his niche and thus the inner comfort which he tries to achieve through climbing. An out-of-place, "medieval" figure, an outcast in the city Rand cuts quite a different figure in nature. For Rand "the exposure to wilderness and mountains often brings an epiphany: the world has a place for me!" (Lester 91), and climbing becomes an attempt to counter the disillusionment with his 'city' life and to find calmness, tranquillity.

Rand feels that he has found his place and his true self. This awareness seems so embracing and significant that it does not matter what comes after it, because through the mountains he has come to know the spiritual wholeness. Thus, climbing becomes a need, a way of defining oneself. For Rand it becomes a metaphor for the search for his place and identity. The protagonist gives up everything for the sake of climbing, which becomes a substitute of life itself. Any bad experiences during the climb are compensated to Rand by the feeling of elation at a summit. Climbing becomes the affirmation, the essence, and the sense of life, at least for a time:

A passion for climbing had come over him. As soon as he finished one, he was ready to start another. [...] He was either insatiate or absolutely exhausted but then would rise fresh the next day. He was swept up in it entirely as if for the very first time. When he climbed, life welled up, overflowed in him. His ambitions had been ordinary, but after the Dru it was different. A great, an indestructible happiness filled him. He had found his life. (88-89)

Rand is presented – as are many other climbers, for example, Daniel (*The Ascent*), Sankey (*Climbers*), or Boukreev (*The Climb*) – as a person who climbs to compensate for something missing or to undo the mistakes of the past. Unfortunately in the long run Rand does not find mountaineering as satisfying as he has hoped it to be, it has not become a solution of all the life problems, thus mountaineering acquires a destructive power because Rand fails to recognize the difference between the mountains themselves

and the dreams or illusions associated with them. This condition can be described in the following way:

Those who are irresistibly attracted to the mountains have often only experienced in an emotion a greatness that is beyond their understanding. They have not learned to master a new inner state emerging from the deepest recesses of their beings. Thus, they *do not know why* they seek increasingly wider horizons, freer skies, tougher peaks; or *why*, from peak to peak, from wall to wall, and from danger to danger, through their experiences they have become inexplicably disillusioned with everything that, in their ordinary lives, appeared to them as most lively, important, and exciting. This which appeals to them and moves them is the powerful inner message that is directly evident in everything in the mountains. [emphasis added] (Evola 21)

Rand's tragedy lies in the fact that he does not know anything besides climbing. Climbing has been his way of perceiving the world but suddenly he finds himself outside this world due to his fears and lack of inspiration and disillusionment.

## *The Ascent. Jeff Long*

### The Novel

The novel was written in 1992 by a climbing writer, Jeff Long. The author was born in 1952 in Texas, and now lives in Colorado. His first encounter with climbing was during his time in college, where Long also tried to write short stories. The author has travelled much in his life, also in Nepal, climbing on Everest and Makalu and then teaching mountaineering to the Nepalese army. Long recounts his climbing career in the following way: “I was never much of a climber. I just loved the company and landscape. At my own level of the game, I took huge risks and chased some real monsters, went blind (a few times) from the altitude, got frostbit, lost friends to lightning and avalanches, and now and then actually felt God’s face in the stone” (Long, “Biography”).

For Jeff Long, climbing was a source for his many writings in terms of themes and experiences. During his stay in Nepal, Long was also arrested on smuggling charges, and although he did not spend much time in prison, it was enough to learn about Tibet’s tragic history from a number of political exiles he met there.

Long’s first climbing novel, *Angels of Light*, appeared in 1987 based on the true event that took place in Yosemite in the 1980s when an airplane smuggling drugs crashed in the mountains and several climbers claimed the bounty. Another climbing novel is *The Wall*, which can be called a sequel of *Angels of Light* as it deals with two veteran climbers:

Once upon a time, thirty-five years ago, Hugh and Lewis were Yosemite legends. El Capitan was their holy grail, and their destiny seemed written on its big walls. Here they met the women who married them, then left them. Hugh’s wife mysteriously disappeared into the desert. Lewis’s wife is divorcing him. Now the old friends reunite to climb El Cap one last time and make a fresh start. (Long, “Books”)

*The Ascent* is the most widely read climbing novel of Jeff Long, which received the American Literary Award and the Boardman-Tasker Award for Mountain Literature. The novel is set in Tibet and recounts the events of the U.S. Ultimate Summit Expedition attempting to climb Everest from the north side. In *The Ascent*, in the Author’s note Jeff Long finds it necessary to explain which elements of the novel are fictional and which not. Thus, he explains the etymology of the Kore Wall on Everest, and excuses his artistic approach to certain locations before the connoisseurs: “[t]he Kore Wall Route is an imaginary monster, drawn in bits from the south and west faces

of Makalu and glued to the north face of Everest. Himalayan veterans will also note my fiddling with certain geographical features of the region, [...]. I hope these liberties won't ruin the mountain's reality" (11).

### **The Plot**

The story opens in 1974 when Abe Burns, the protagonist of the novel, gains his first climbing experience during a rescue effort after two climbers have taken a bad fall in a remote area. One of the climbers is badly injured, and another, a 20-year-old girl is jammed in a crevasse. All efforts to pull her out fail, and the rescuers come to the hard decision to leave her behind in order to save her partner and outrace a quickly approaching deadly storm. Abe, against orders of the leader, stays with the girl and helplessly witnesses Diana fade away.

Next time Abe is seen in 1991. He is 35 and has been working as a paramedic and rescue climber for the last 12 years. He is totally exhausted by the brain- and heart-numbing job, as well as by a breaking relationship. It is at this point of Abe's life that he gets an unexpected offer to join the Everest expedition as a doctor, and, as he later finds out, he has to thank Daniel Corder for it, a survivor of the old tragedy. Abe realizes that he and Daniel seem to share an invisible bond through their memory of the dead girl. Both, Abe and Daniel seem to have come to terms with their traumatic experiences, or rather have managed to numb their feelings by either making death and human sufferings into a daily routine, as it is in Abe's case, or, as it is in Daniel's, by forgetting himself in the high mountains and having this obsession written in his own flesh and blood.

The expedition goes to Tibet to attempt the first ascent of the ferocious Kore Wall of Everest. But even here, at the end of the world, the climbers are confronted with the 'dirt' of civilization when they become aware of the Chinese holocaust of the Tibetans. In this context the highly acclaimed values of civilization are questioned through the paradigm in which Westerners and the Chinese represent civilization whereas the Tibetans – the primitive people waiting to be civilized.

The climbers want to concentrate on their climbing and ignore other things, especially the more complicated ones. The team-mates dismiss the stories of a holocaust as too remote from their own reality, or too troubling, excusing themselves by the simple "we are not involved in it, we've just come to climb." In this manner, the expedition members turn into the Silent Majority, and by their attempt to climb Everest, they are "renting the mountain from a regime that doesn't even own it. Paying lip service to butchers" (57). But the climbers being generally rather apolitical and, to a certain extent, asocial, can no longer simply close their eyes and pretend ignorance after

they have become involved in the conflict by helping a Tibetan *tulku*, a holy man who has escaped from a Chinese prison and is trying to cross the mountains to Nepal. Unfortunately, he has been tortured in prison and has suffered irreparable damage to his body, which will make his crossing the high mountain passes on his own impossible. Yet, the expedition members believe that everybody has his own mountain to climb and do nothing beyond trying to heal the *tulku* and hide him from the Chinese liaison officer.

The preparations of the climb are almost finished: from the last camp the summit tripod can be seen. That is when disaster strikes: because of the martial law unexpectedly introduced in the country, all tourists have to be escorted to the border. The climbers have only five days to strip the mountain of their gear. For Daniel, who sees this climb as a possibility of redeeming his soul from the demons, to reach the summit is vital. Suddenly, the authorities grant the climbers ten more days to finish the climb. As it later turns out, Gus has betrayed the *tulku* to the Chinese in order to buy the needed time. Unfortunately the last push to the summit is interrupted by an avalanche, which almost kills the four climbers close to the top, Daniel, Gus, Kelly, and Abe. Gus is severely injured, Kelly is snow-blind so the climbers descend. At Base Camp Abe, with the help of the toughest expedition members, has to amputate Gus's leg above the knee. The team also witnesses the capture of the barely alive *tulku*. Daniel, devastated by the aftermath of the climb, decides to try and correct the mistakes made during the expedition. He wants to help the *tulku* escape to Nepal, but the boy has died by now. Daniel is, nevertheless, resolute to bring the boy's body to Nepal in order to at least prevent the Chinese from mutilating and dishonouring it. Daniel dies in the attempt, in another avalanche. But in Daniel's last glance directed at Abe, Abe sees the peace of mind that has escaped Daniel until now.



### **The Landscape of Climbing**

The visions of the mountains in *Solo Faces* and *The Ascent* differ considerably. While Rand regards the mountains as home and only occasionally sees them as his enemy, the latter is the predominant sentiment in *The Ascent*, where the mountains are described as beautiful and sublime, the home of gods, yet at the same time they evoke a strengthened awareness of human mortality and human insignificance against the background of eternity and vastness.

In both novels the mountains have the power to lure and fill a climber's mind with their presence to the extent that the climber is ready to die on a mountain, pursuing some rather obscure rewards.

In *The Ascent*, the attitude to the mountains is mostly presented through Abe's perception, occasionally supplemented by the comments of other characters. Abe's first encounter with the mountains happens on a remote, nameless route in Wyoming. The lack of specifications concerning the mountain or the route is indicative of Abe's very vague idea regarding his whereabouts and the difficulties a specific route may pose. The mountain itself and Abe's perception of it are described in rather dark hues: a sense of utterly not belonging in the hostile surroundings, "that alien expanse" (19), is evoked by the sounds of a frozen river, where "the water was animal beneath its sturdy shell" (17), and the sight of "the sun [dying] at noon in a gangrene sky" (18). The grim atmosphere is created through strong images justifiably associated with danger, illness and death: an 'animal' (presumably ready for a kill), 'the *dying* sun,' '*gangrene* sky,' '*alien* expanse' [emphasis added].

Unlike Abe's first mountain, his biggest 'prospect,' Everest, is described in great detail, is authenticated through historical facts and particular landmarks. The stories of previous attempts are alluded to, enabling mountaineers to 'recognize' the mountain. This is the strategy also used in *Solo Faces* but regarding a non-existing route this time:

Over the last ten years, three different teams had attempted the route, a vertical chimera of rock and ice known as the Kore Wall. It was known among mountaineers as a severe creation – 9,000 vertical feet from top to bottom – that approached the summit straight on, a direct or *direttissima* up the right center of the vast North Face. The first try back in 1984 had been all British, with the exception of one American climber. After pioneering to 27,000 feet and surmounting most of the geological barriers, they'd gotten mauled and surrendered. In '89, half of a New Zealand expedition had vanished on the upper

reaches in a storm. And last spring, two Japanese and a Sherpa had been killed by an avalanche. (44)

The landscape of Everest is additionally defined by features, one of which is the name of the route, the Kore Wall: 'Kore' is a frequent epithet of Persephone, a Greek goddess trapped in the underworld. Abe believes it was Daniel who has named the route in memory of his dead fiancée. Because of this superposed feature, Daniel's ascending Everest by this particular route is understood to be a possibility of his spiritual redemption. Due to a bond which Daniel believes to share with Abe, he wants to summit Everest with Abe. Thus for both, Abe and Daniel, the landscape of the Kore Wall on Everest also features a virtual crevasse with the ghost of Diana waiting to be either saved or freed, and with it Daniel and Abe, both "bound by the same disappearance" (49) will be saved as well, although neither of them acknowledges their need of being saved.

Yet the ascent may prove more difficult than Abe has imagined before coming to Tibet. The geographical features seem to create an oppressing psychological atmosphere: hinting at the smallness and insignificance of a human being put against such profound dimensions and such bareness of landscape. Abe is fascinated and simultaneously frightened by Tibet's emptiness, proportion and timelessness in a way he most probably has never been in the Rockies or the Cascades:

All along the right-hand horizon lay the Himalayas, abrupt and enormous. Unlike the Nepalese side of the chain with its foothills and forests and paddies, there was no preface to these eruptions. Abe couldn't get over that. There was nothing intermediate between the extremes.

Human beings – even animals or vegetation – were practically an event. (57)

Tibet is a land of mystery, a blank spot, from a Westerner's point of view because of its geographical position and due to its closed status within the People's Republic of China. Abe tries to place himself in the Tibetan context by finding geographical points of reference through identifying the mountains, but he fails as all the photographs of the mountains he has seen before have been the contours of the mountains as seen from the Nepalese side, and

Here in Tibet, the profiles were not only reversed, but distorted.

When Abe asked which were which, Robby said, "Forget it. We're on the backside of the moon now. Our labels don't count here." But then he joined Abe at the window and pointed out different mountains and gave their names. Even with Robby's help, though, the range didn't become any more familiar to Abe, and that just made it seem more alien. (60)

Geography plays an important role in conveying the feeling of being cut off from the outside world and having little hope of getting back to it as “the pass vanished behind them, and their entrance and exit to the outside world was just a memory” (67). One is repeatedly reminded how far from the outside world the climbers are. The sense of being lost is conveyed through Abe, who is feeling “handicapped, because they were half the planet removed from any skies he could reliably read” (67), and through the team-mates’ comments like “‘We’re not in the World anymore, Doc. We are on expedition now’” (80), or “‘The edge of the world is here’, Li commented” (91). Thus, the impression of being lost and trapped in this strange world so unlike the one the climbers came from is reiterated throughout the novel and is even stronger at the end: the expedition members have to get back to civilization as soon as possible to take care of the injured but they are cut off from the outer world by avalanches which block the pass out of the region.

Yet it is Tibet’s alienation that also makes the region so captivating and bewitching, as “nobody knows Tibet, and so we can all imagine it is whatever we want” (63). As for Abe, he has certain expectations of what Everest should look like, but he becomes aware of them only as they start to shatter. Abe, in his unconscious longing for a frontier, one of the major notions that have formed the American collective identity, has imagined Everest to be almost a different planet, a virgin territory. In his eyes, Everest becomes the extension of the frontier, the virgin territory promising a new start... but which turns into a crude awakening. The reality of Base Camp<sup>41</sup> is a bitter disappointment for Abe and the anticlimax of his expectations (although, it is unreasonable to expect ‘virgin’ soil in the place where other expeditions have been), in a way depriving him of a possibility of a new start:

At first glance, it looked like the aftermath of a gigantic New Year’s party with confetti thrown across the whole landscape. Then Abe saw that it was trash, years and years of trash...

That wasn’t the worst of it, either. Abe opened the door and hopped nimbly to the ground and landed, literally, in shot, in the dried feces of their mountaineering ancestors. And now Abe saw that in every direction, human and yak dung lay coiled and dropped in random piles, each one mummified by the sun.

Wasteland, Abe thought, and immediately filed the pun for his slide shows. But the filth and desolation kept on hitting at his mind. It was so unexpected. (70)

---

<sup>41</sup> A base camp is a campsite at the foot of a mountain used to launch a climb. Mount Everest has two Base Camps on the opposite sides: North and South.

This is not the only instance when mountaineering and the image of a mountaineer are utterly de-romanticized, deconstructed.<sup>42</sup> Traditionally, the climbers were presented as heroes, made appealing by their toughness, dignity and daring; The mountains – as the seat of gods, the dwelling place of super-humans, the source of beauty but also of danger and the feeling of the sublime. *The Ascent* yields a more versatile vision of both mountaineering and mountaineers: the beauty of the mountains, at least on the lower reaches, is trampled by previous expeditions and turned into a trash-dump. But against this background Everest is standing magnificent in its purity, “projecting brilliant white light” (71).

The mountaineering legends concerning sights, places, feelings at particular moments are also degraded in a way. Abe is anxious to get to the summit of Everest and is savouring the anticipated experience of the sublime. But when Abe and Kelly finally reach Camp Five that opens the view to the summit, the top of Everest seems to Abe rather anticlimactic. The mountain itself, like the image of a mountaineer, is deconstructed and presented as a dull hill. There is no magnificence or expanse Abe has associated with the summit of the highest mountain in the world: “Abe was disappointed. For all its majesty and fury, Everest didn’t finish with a dramatic sculptured prow or a sharp pinnacle. Instead the mountain just rounded into a sorry little hump-back, a gray lump shrugging at the gray sky. [...] The tripod reminded Abe of an altarpiece for ants, ridiculous and not at all triumphant” (231).

The further Abe proceeds the more prominent role does the altitude play, increasing the feeling of alienation in the climbers. At some point, hanging on the wall, Abe starts to believe that Kelly and he are cut off even from the microcosm of ABC<sup>43</sup> despite maintaining visual contact with it. The feeling of discomfort additionally intensifies as Abe and Kelly face a night on almost nothing but thin air. These aspects culminate in a feeling of being totally torn away from the real world and, in a weird way, turning into deities: “[t]hey had lost the earth. They had thrown it down beneath their feet. Like monks they were giving up their place in the world and becoming anonymous. Unlike monks, they were striking pacts with their individual demons, honing a radical arrogance and rising upon their whims” (126).

---

<sup>42</sup> “Deconstruction” here means “taking apart, diminishing the importance or value of something and is not a term used in Derrida’s sense. An idea of a mountaineer/mountaineering is taken apart and certain foundational concepts are reviewed and destroyed and new ones are created to replace the discarded ones.

<sup>43</sup> Advanced Base Camp.

Over and over again Abe is confronted with the remoteness of Tibet, physical and ‘mental,’ for the lack of a better word, as he experiences different aspects of life in this surreal place. Again, he is confirmed in the thought that Tibet was “on the edge of time. The world was rough and primordial out here” (138). But one thing Abe is in no way prepared for in this remote place is cruelty brought by civilization, namely the tortures Chinese soldiers inflict on the Tibetans. When Abe sees the monk savaged by the Chinese, he cannot believe his eyes: “[i]t [the practice of tortures] was beyond belief. Abe’s teeth were gritted and he felt tears of frustration forming in his eyes. This wasn’t supposed to be a part of the deal. He’d come to see beauty and strength and utopia. He blinked his tears away” (140).

On another occasion Abe comes across as innocently unaware of the dark moments of human history in this wilderness. When the climbers are led to Rongbuk monastery, Abe believes Li’s explanation that the destruction of the monastery was caused by an earthquake. He is shaken by Carlos’ remark that the round marks on the buildings are from Chinese artillery, not from natural elements.

Back on the mountain, while climbing to a higher camp, Abe realizes the insignificance of human presence and human vulnerability in such vastness, especially when he casts a glance onto his fellow climbers some distance below: “Abe was impressed with how slow and tiny they appeared, even though they weren’t so far below. The mountain had miniaturized them. They looked trivial and expendable” (160), “[i]t was like watching a bug move” (161). Again the vastness and remoteness give the sense of being on a strange planet where the time turns liquid: “[t]ime bent around him. From his little perch, ABC was much too small to see and all the other camps were out of sight. He tried guessing where Base might lie along the glacial tendrils, but the Tibetan plateau swallowed his estimations whole. He had the sense of having climbed right out of the world” (160).

After a rather long and very exhausting period spent in the vertical and hostile world Abe descends to the altitudes and landscapes closer to those he is used to, he feels awed, ecstatic, struck by the beauty of the most common things and cannot stop wondering at the things he has never truly appreciated. Undoubtedly, the experience of the dangers on the mountain makes him more sensuous toward things usually taken for granted:

All around him, the world assembled itself with details that grew sharper and more lustrous. A chorus of grouse gabbled on the perimeter of sunshine and

frost. Big sticks of glacier mud hung beside the trail like temple columns. Insignificant rocks took on an almost sacramental distinctness beneath his Nikes. Part of his awe was plain hunger and fatigue and the richer air, Abe knew. But there was more than that to it. [...]. Now, descending from the Kore's dark, slaughtering radiance, he understood. These rocks, this birdsong, the blue sky: They were simple things, but they were everything.

Base Camp sprang out at Abe with its candy-coloured domes and bustling industry. He came to a surprised halt and stood still, weaving slightly, taking it all in. He had forgotten [...] what it was to hear water flowing loose in a stream.

There was laughter in the air, [...] and even the background silence had a lush melody to it. (183)

As Abe enters the camp itself, he seems to have come back from a war. Everything is an unfamiliar miracle to him and to his team-mates he seems quite deranged. In this way, Abe finds a new source of the sublime – the simplest things: “[h]e felt drunk and couldn’t quit grinning. After the mountain’s murderous violence, this peace seemed surreal. He could actually sit here without ducking or listening for the crack of avalanches or shivering or sucking at the air for breath. He could just sit” (184).

When Kelly tells Abe she will heat up water to wash him and he can then rest until dinner in Kelly’s tent, Abe breaks into tears.

The mountain influences a person’s soul even more than the body. Abe comments on this aspect on a number of occasions, but none of them is more picturesque than when Abe returns to the Base Camp after a week’s absence and sees Li, the group’s liaison officer: “Abe was shocked by how much Li’s accent had thickened over the last nine weeks. His syntax had slipped radically. It was the altitude and the forced hermitage, Abe knew. They were lapsing, all of them” (186).

The wilderness is more and more getting into the climbers’ souls. Abe catches himself at the thought that he cannot remember the name of the sick monk and it disturbs him. But then he cannot even remember his girlfriend’s face. The dark influence of the wilderness, of the mountain is also addressed by Gus when she laconically comments on Daniel’s condition: “[...] he stayed high too long. You know, the thousand-mile stare, all that” (198).

The landscape of climbing plays a crucial role in many aspects and on many occasions but most of all at the end of the expedition, when the climbers are waiting for the trucks to be taken to the outer world and the time is pressing due to Gus’ precarious condition. The vastness and the distance the climbers would have to cover are

overwhelming. There is a possibility of trying to get out of the camp on their own, but the implications of it are frightening:

The alternative to waiting was also on everybody's minds. Daniel knew the way out of here. They had followed him up the Hill. If need be, they could follow him across one of the high passes into Nepal. But no one favored such extremes. For one thing they knew from Daniel's experience the awful price they were likely to pay for crossing the range in monsoon. (263)

The geographical specifics of the region as an alienating aspect become evident again at the close of the novel as well as the changes the climbers have gone through, making them into super-humans in a way: Abe is made to lead a group of Chinese soldiers on a chase for Daniel, who is trying to cross a pass into Nepal. Abe feels quite at home at this altitude, on the glacier, between the crevasses while the Chinese, who represent average persons, feel totally out of place and easy victims of the elements:

Shortly afterward, two of the soldiers became very ill. They sat on rocks, holding their heads, with vomit on their pants and boots. The officer shouted at them, then sent them back to camp.

Li and the remaining soldiers grew more and more uncoordinated. Hopping across a glacier stream, one fell into the water. Farther on, another twisted his knee. It was painful to see them groping onward. Each wore the grimacing mask of altitude sickness. (279)

Abe, on the contrary, is pleased by a recognition that he is at home, he belongs here:

He felt strong and lithe and fast, and was grateful for the hair on his face and hanging down over his eyes. They had reached 20,000 feet, but the air felt rich and smooth to him. He bounded from stone to stone, almost playful. I belong here, Abe thought with surprise. Not so long ago, he had been convinced this wasteland was unfit for any animal. (279-80)

It has become a certain literary tradition to compare a mountain with a dangerous beast, in a way extending the idea of the sublime: a mountain, like a beast, inspires awe, adoration or horror depending on its mood. It can be either warm and yielding or vicious and treacherous. In *The Ascent*, Everest is not simply an immense pile of rocks. It is a creature that makes Abe and his team-mates feel uneasy, defenceless under its gaze. The mountaineers are intimidated by the immense powers and omnipresence of Everest, which "hovered like the ghost of an Egyptian pyramid" (81). One of the climbers addresses his unease, describing that "'It's like being an animal in a zoo. [...] Every time I look up there, it's watching us.' [...] Whenever they turned around, Everest was there" (77). The climbers sense that the whole landscape and their minds are dominated by the mountain: "Everest didn't just overshadow ABC, it towered above. It utterly

dominated the land. Time and space had frozen tight here. The earth had stopped. As in Ptolemy's scheme, the sun seemed to orbit this point. Here was the center" (111).

The climbers feel threatened by this monster but they seem to find a way to control it, at least to control their own fears by reducing Everest to a picture on a postcard, as "something both [Abe and Kelly] could manage in their minds" (116). Yet over and over again Abe is reminded of the beast, but while being petrified by it he seems to be equally fascinated, experiencing the true feeling of the sublime: "[...] he [Abe] heard the mountain stretch itself. Its joints creaked underneath his boots as the glacier settled. Snowbeds rustled. A distant green avalanche sloughed loose, beautiful and deadly" (123).

Abe sees a monstrous creature on every step he takes up the mountain: his climbing protection is not a number of mechanical devices anymore but looks "like the rope had been sucked into a devouring mouth. The mountain was alive, no doubt about it" (125). Abe tries to subdue his fears and entertains the tiny hope that the climbers might have a bid at success, and that "[m]aybe the Hill wasn't such an alien place after all. It had been conquered before. It could be conquered again" (116).

Everest is not only vast but also moody and rather treacherous, putting in a fight in its attempt to ward the uninvited intruders off: "[s]ome days the mountain just sat there like a titan's still life, not a color moving on the hot blinding canvas. Then again there were days of rage, everything torn to rags if you could see the Hill at all, the mountain reassembling in its arsenal, shifting its defenses, readying for a kill" (127).

On the upper reaches of the mountain the climbers are much more exposed to the rage of the mountain and are at its mercy, with the ice- and rockfalls screaming on every side, hunting the climbers to gauge them, to break and skin them (see 158). Abe, who is the protagonist of the novel and with whom the readers are meant to identify themselves, is scared out of his wits when he is caught by a rockfall in a tight spot and extremely exhausted mentally by the unyielding verticality of the mountain. Then he relives the shock of seeing Daniel being shed by the mountain and then the relief of seeing Daniel alive and not much worse for the wear. And as Abe starts to feel that the next little thing will kill him, everything ceases: the climbers reach the next camp situated in a cave. When Abe enters it, he is overcome by the surge of very strong emotions: he feels exalted at the realization that he is actually inside the mountain, in a kind of sanctuary with a horizontal dimension to it:



He had entered another dimension in here. Outside there had been no respite. But here there was an inside to the mountain. There was a sanctuary not only from the rockfall and the crucifying sunlight, but also from the relentless verticality. He took a few prickly steps forward atop his two-inch crampon teeth. The floor was flat. He couldn't get over that. He had forgotten what it was like to stand on a horizontal surface. [...] Tears of happiness welled up at this luxury of sitting on a thing that was soft in a place that was safe. They were out of danger. Nothing could hurt them anymore. (168)

Abe is intoxicated by this new dimension of the mountain and delirious to have survived all the dangers until now. He is somewhat stupefied by the pain from his injury and at the same time experiences a surge of bliss when he feels love for the whole world and sees the extraordinary beauty of common, or even objectively ugly things. For instance, Gus, badly sunburnt with skin peeling from her face, snotty, with split lips and greasy uncombed hair, stinking of old sweat and the like, seems gorgeous to him.

However, the illusion of safety and peace does not last long: when Abe wakes up after a nap in the cave and glances around, he is taken aback by the image and its implication of the mountain sapping the climbers' strengths, penetrating them from inside and making them look "like three corpses dumped into a common grave" (171). Abe is yet again aware of the mountain's immense power and realities. Even in this seeming sanctuary they are at the mercy of the mountain and "[t]he mountain had begun to mineralize the climbers, coloring them like stone" (171). The cave gives the impression of safety but it is just a mousetrap: "[t]he mountain was voracious and they were in its belly" (171). Yet somehow Abe cannot get rid of the thought that they have been offered this relief from verticality and dangers "as if the mountain had wanted them to slumber undisturbed, on and on" (172). The fact that "[t]he route's most serious obstacle, the Shoot, was now tamed. They had captured it with their ropes and it was open to passage" (172) seems to provide only a slight relief.

The mountain is presented not only as a beast but also as a heavy drug, which is extremely difficult to give up once one has got addicted. To turn one's back on the mountain, especially Everest, demands sometimes even more effort than to proceed. It is also a commonly known fact that to reach the top is relatively easy. It is a much bigger challenge to come back alive. When Abe manages to break this addiction to the mountain and to turn his back on it at one point, he sees it as a personal victory: "It struck him. He had survived the mountain. And not just in the minute-to-minute sense of dodging its missiles or making it through another night. He had turned his back on

the Hill, and however temporary this respite, it was now only an image against the sky. He was alive” (184).

Abe reflects on his beliefs regarding the meaning of a mountain to a climber in the hours before his and Daniel’s final attempt. He used to believe that a mountain is mainly in a climber’s mind and consists of memories and dreams. Yet here, on the upper slopes of Everest, Abe personifies the mountain and feels its will, believing in the mountain’s power to yield or to resist. Now, he sees that human will or efforts are too insignificant for “conquering” the mountain:

Long ago, drinking straight shots on flat land at the end of a sunny day of rock climbing, Abe had held forth that a mountain is nothing more than a pyramid of memories and dreams. He had insisted. No mountain exists without the climber to perceive it.

There was the opposite possibility, of course, that every climber is simply the invention of long geological slumber. Just as climbers can manipulate their dreams, a mountain can manipulate its own ascent. And when the mountain wakes, the dream ends and the climber evaporates. (239)

The mountain appears as a beast again, wild and fierce, striking to kill:

Like a giant serpent loosening its coils, the first of the avalanches let go with a hiss. Each of [the climbers] knew what it was with hair-trigger wisdom. Like the snow itself, their awareness of the danger had collected heavier and deeper overnight. The Yellow Band overhead was loaded with dry snow shingled with wet snow and they were in the cold white field of fire. (240)

Everest is presented as a beast guarding treasures, and an ascent, especially an alpine style<sup>44</sup> ascent is treated “as a brilliant theft, a jewel stolen from under the dragon’s nose” (76). From this perspective, the climbers are seen as warriors trying to defeat a dangerous adversary. When Abe summarises the phenomenon of ‘waging a war against a mountain,’ common in the mountaineering world and also addressed in *Solo Faces*, he points out that

The very language of ascent abounded with war terms: siege tactics, assault, base camp, supply lines, logistics, planting camps, pushing the line, retreat, victory, conquest, and planting the flag. (77)

Low-slung and mean, the camp had the lean, breathless look of a battlefield headquarters. (109)

They were on the mountain itself now, behind enemy lines. (125)

They locked and loaded into their harnesses and onto their ropes and humped their backpacks with the grim pluck of *grunts on patrol, infiltrating the*

---

<sup>44</sup> Climbing with very little equipment and a minimum of external help.

mountain *in tiny platoons, probing it for weak points*, relentless. [emphasis added] (127)

At times, a genuine resentment is noticeable in the climbers' remarks regarding the mountain. Yet on other occasions the mountain is revered. When victory seems to be merely a stone's throw away, the Chinese introduce martial law in Tibet and want all the tourists out of the country. Thus, the climbers are robbed of the possibility to make the final push to the top of Everest even though everything is prepared. In the eyes of the expedition members, the Hill has defeated them. Despite the disappointment of broken dreams, for some climbers, life-time dreams, the expedition members decide "to pay their respects to the enemy. Stump wanted to finish a watercolour of the North Face. Thomas declared a great urge to piss on the mountain once and for all. Carlos said he'd be happy just to sleep with the Mother Goddess<sup>45</sup> one final night" (206).

The mountain, jubilant over the climbers' misfortune, "[...] was floating in a scoop of soft dawn light. With her manelike summit massif and outstretched ridges, the Hill had the aspect of a sphinx splashed with rainbows [...]" (206). However, when the climbers get another chance for a final push, the mountain seems to react to it immediately and consciously strengthen its defence line through a monsoon snowfall, which let "[...] the mountain [...] enter[...] a new configuration. Six inches of snow wasn't much in the way of armor, but another storm or two could sheathe the mountain with lethal defenses" (215). And so it happens. When Abe, Kelly, Gus and Daniel try to break the mountain's defences on their last push to the top, the mountain puts up a fierce fight, which is described by the use of militant vocabulary: the tent gets "blasted," the mountain has "its range now," the climbers' "capture." The actions of the mountain are further described in terms of military tactics: "[n]ow that they [the climbers] were in full rout, the mountain was reclaiming its territory with a vengeance. There were no prisoners up here. Those who lagged, died" (246). The four climbers seem to have kept their lives for the moment by hiding overnight in a crevasse, but even there the ominous sounds reminded them of the possibilities when "[t]he glacier creaked like a huge armada of empty ships" (255).

### **The Sublime**

The feelings of terror, veneration and awe are skilfully mixed in the novel when the mountains are described. When Abe arrives at Base Camp and turns his glance to the

---

<sup>45</sup> The Tibetan name for Everest.

surrounding mountains, he is oppressed by the dimensions of the place, by its timelessness, by immense powers hinted at and, at times, revealed. Abe cannot but be overwhelmed by the greatness of Everest. He is inspired and terrified by the sublime when he looks around. In his letter to Jamie he writes:

Our valley is a gigantic prison cell. [...] Barren. Tedious. There is no life here. Time has stopped. Everything occurs in enormous proportions – the blue sky, the mountainsides, the Rongbuk Glacier. I've never known such vastness. It humbles me. The closest things to human scale in this outsized land are the tiny fluorescent red and blue and green lichen that freckle the rocks. The lichens and us – we share this dead place. I can almost hear my hair growing. (75)

The feeling of being humbled is at times replaced by the feeling of being petrified when Abe becomes aware of the magnitude of menacing powers lurking in the mountains. He remembers the outlines of the mountain on maps and the image of a great, fear-inspiring creature comes to his mind: “the glacier resembled a white octopus with its tentacles flung out among all the surrounding valleys” (105). When Abe is watching the teammates on the trail, they seem to be “swallowed whole by a maze of looming mud walls and loose stone and deep, icy corridors” (105). The closer the climbers come to the foot of Everest, the smaller the margin for mistakes grows and the more they are made aware of possible fatal consequences, some of them rather gruesome. At such moments, the parallels between Diana dying in a crevasse, the name of the wall, standing for a woman imprisoned in the underworld, and the carcass of an animal ‘spitted out’ by a crevasse are worth pursuing. They can work as either a reminder of Diana’s death or a warning for those alive:

Soon they came upon a horribly twisted animal dangling from an ice wall. Half of it lay outside the ice, the other half still frozen into the blue glass. Birds had pecked away the eyes, and the elements had stripped much of the rest down to bone.

“Road kill,” Gus whispered [...] “This poor thing probably fell down a crevasse, probably during some expedition. Now the glacier’s just getting around to belching it up. Everest does that a lot, turning out its dead.” (107)

But yet again this dreadful picture of putrefaction is contrasted by the unexpected, sublime beauty of Everest:

And suddenly the whole earth just halted. And so did Abe.

With no warning, the gigantic gleaming body of Everest was rearing up in front of them. They had lost sight of it for three days and now it jutted one and a half miles above them, stabbing into the jetstream. Its curtains of afternoon light hung before them like a dream. (109)

But the beauty of Everest is not misleading for the climbers. Neither of them harbours illusions regarding the dangers of the climb, especially when the team enters “the so-called death zone, where big mountains tend to wreck the delicate mechanisms of human physiology. Nothing lived up here for long except lichen and a rare breed of spider with antifreeze glycerine for blood” (121).

Abe cannot but feel fascinated and scared at the same time by the infinite powers of the elements as he watches “A distant green avalanche sloughed loose, *beautiful and deadly*” [emphasis added] (123). A feeling reminiscent of that of the sublime also arises from Abe’s physical condition: “[...] ill and exhilarated at the same time. Part of him reveled in the height and spectacle. Part of him just wanted to quit moving and lie down for a nap. Try as he might, the ambivalence – the charged current between misery and magic – wouldn’t switch off” (125).

This feeling is recounted again when Abe is readying to step out of his tent and bracing himself to resist the violence of the elements and, despite the hostile environment, is flabbergasted by the impressive scenery:

He braced for the cold air and unzipped the tent door. The cold lashed him across the eyes and he flinched. Then he got a good look and said, “God.” Outside the blackness was perforated with a million stars. There were stars behind the stars, a solid carpet of lights. He looked up and where the carpet ended in a raggedy line, the mountain pronounced its dark domain. (153)

A totally different feeling towards the Hill overwhelms Abe at a bitter moment of receiving the news about martial law in the country, which means the end of the expedition because all the tourists have to be escorted to the border immediately. When Abe looks at Everest, he is astounded by the malice hiding in grandeur. The mountain seems boundless, the mission of taming it – impossible. Abe is astonished by the space and dimensions again:

[t]he mountain attacked with a wave of raw white light. Unprepared, Abe gasped and bowed his head, clawing for the sunglasses in his pocket. Ordinarily the sight would have provoked a nod of admiration, but not this morning.

Even with the glasses covering his eyes, the mountain was too bright to look at for more than a few seconds. All definition was gone, washed away by the pure illumination. No lines or shadows, no stone or ice, no ridges or cols. Even the summit pyramid was illegible in the midst of all that radiance. The mountain simply fused into sunlight and sky, hiding itself in infinity. It made their ambitions seem fruitless and tiny. (204-205)

Yet the true shock is still to come: on the day of the final push, eventually granted by the Chinese, Abe experiences the infinite might of the mountain and the mercilessness of natural powers. Abe steps out of the cave in Camp Four to resume the ascent in the

morning and is virtually ripped from the mountain by a hurricane gale. The whole world seems to go berserk, “Abe lay plastered against the wall, too astounded to move, not certain he even could. He wasn’t hurt but his confusion was almost painful. He had to fight back his shock just to register bits and pieces of what was happening” (227).

Slowly, Abe manages to return to the cave he has just left. Only then can he take in the surroundings, fully appreciating the situation. He is torn between two emotions of being petrified and flabbergasted at the sight and even more at the dimensions of the natural violence. And even more so is Abe mesmerized by a seeming invisibility of the storm:

He couldn’t get over the preternatural power of the wind and stared fearfully at the mountainside. There were no bench-marks – no tree branches or tumbleweeds or flags or wind socks – to help him gauge the force, nothing to even suggest the wind was blowing. Any loose snow had been scoured away. But for its peaceful appearance, the North Face was now a gigantic maelstrom. (228)

A considerable amount of space is devoted to the description of the power of nature, at times extremely destructive but equally impressive. Shock, awe, and the fascination by the infinite beauty of the mountain can be read in Abe’s thoughts. It is also through Abe’s eyes that the devastation of the biggest-yet avalanche is seen, but even more is left to be deduced regarding the ferocity of the elements and their infinite strengths:

ABC was a mile away from the base, but the aftershock still shook the climbers and the spindrift stung Abe’s face. When the avalanche hit the Kore’s base, its rubble fanned long and wide. The apron of debris barrelled closer and closer to camp. [...] Abe did not move, though. He didn’t flinch. He was too tired, but also he knew it would be futile to dodge. He had learned that much here.

For the rest of his life, Abe would be glad he stood and watched, because a rainbow sprang up in the white powder. Its colors were almost not colors, they were so close to white themselves. (256)

The climactic description of the sublime occurs at the close of the novel when Abe is made to help the Chinese chase Daniel. The final scene pictures a horror-inspiring but in a way very gorgeous phenomenon: an avalanche so huge it could swipe the whole mountain clean of everything. For a moment Abe and the soldier stare in a trance:

From high upon the summit band, a vast white rose blossomed. It seemed a mile wide up there, absolutely beautiful. The soldier uttered his astonishment. Head craned back, mouth open, he was mesmerized by the thing. Ever so slowly the great white flower lost its petals and the snow came tumbling down. [...]

The avalanche had consumed the entire mountain nearly to its root now. Nothing showed but the front curtain of snow and, behind it, a tempest of a billowing whiteness. The thunder encased them. It rocked and deafened them. (283-84)

### **The Presentation of Character**

The novel is narrated from the third person limited perspective, where the events are shown exclusively through the filter of Abe Burns' personality. The reader follows his thoughts and feelings and is invited to identify him/herself with the narrator, thus crediting Abe with reasonable reliability. Although the terms "protagonist" and "main character" are mostly used as synonyms, it makes sense to call Abe the protagonist of *The Ascent*, and Daniel Corder a main character. Daniel is introduced to the reader at approximately the same time as Abe and he stays in the focus of Abe's (thus also the reader's) attention until the very end of the novel. Corder and other characters are presented externally, through their actions and words as perceived by Abe; the protagonist passes only occasional judgemental comments.

### **The Protagonist**

Unlike Rand in *Solo Faces* who is longing to find bliss, a revelation in the mountains, Abe understands that in the mountains and the wilderness he is about to experience a Blakean "loss of innocence" rather than enlightenment, and he is ready, or thinks he is, "to bare himself to the wilderness" (20), the motif highly reminiscent of that of 'the heart of darkness.' As the expedition reaches the 'entrance' to Tibet, Jorgens, the leader, hints at this aspect by saying: "'All ye who enter, know your soul'" (62). But Abe does not realize just how strong a grip on a human soul the mountains can really have until he peers into the crevasse where Diana is trapped. Suddenly, he feels chilled to the bone because "even those few seconds had threatened to rob his self-possession" (27). Abe, while staying with Diana, feels the abyss sapping his strength to the extent when *he* becomes the one needing rescue and *he* is clinging to the dying girl because he will not survive this ordeal alone.

In *The Ascent*, mountaineers are seen not only as heroic figures, emanating physical and moral strength, always self-possessed and dignified even in their defeat. The image of a heroic mountaineer is de-romanticised and taken apart to a great extent, and here mountaineers are seen as common people susceptible to human faults: they are often weak, afraid, fragile, reduced to primitivism by the elements, and mortal. They are super-humans, on the one hand, and "heroes with fouled pants" (158), on the other. The theme is repeated in John Long's short story "For Everything Its Season" (Salked, Smith 246).

The contrast between romantic expectations or existing clichés regarding what mountaineers should feel while looking at the landscape from a high mountain (be fascinated by the beauty, impressed by the natural powers, experience a revelation of some kind, find a better self, etc.) and what Abe is actually feeling brings out a humorous effect that diminishes the romantic and heroic values of mountaineering and mountaineers. In *The Ascent*, Abe becomes a medium to express such clichés, and to destroy most of them when the reader, through Abe, is given quite a realistic account of his state of mind and body:

He'd always thought that a moment like this – a moment of crystalline reckoning – would be glorious and Zen-like. His mouth would drop open and his eyes would see a million miles and he would think, So this is what it is. Instead Abe carefully knelt by the edge and gripped the rope tight. Positioned just so, he took the liberty of emptying his stomach a thousand feet into the deep. (127)

The image of a mountaineer is further de-romanticized by a number of descriptions wildly diverging from a general image of a mountaineer, made attractive by his/her toughness and retaining a noble manner together with at least basic signs of civilization. It is taken to pieces by presenting the climbers as a primitive tribe, asexual, shedding every sign of what is associated with a 'Westerner.' When at a considerable altitude and after an exhausting day Abe sees Gus and the images of her nudity in the moonlight surface in his memory, he can hardly believe that something that normal could have taken place and that it could have stirred something in him in the past:

But none of that mattered, not at these killing heights. The memory closed itself off. The image of a mysterious moonlit nude vanished. In its place Abe found himself staring dumbly at this wild, primitive female gnawing gum and shaking ropes and now picking at a knot jamming her figure-eight brake. She could have been his sister or his mate or his mother. There was nothing spiritual in the recognition. She was part of his tribe, it was that simple. (149)

Until relatively recently, in fiction and non-fiction the mountaineers have been presented in a dignified way, or at least they are not devoid of dignity even in their defeat. In *The Ascent* the narrator takes a step in a different direction, portraying the romanticized, "the strong" climbers falling apart, and the sight is not pretty: "Carlos's helmet was tipped to one side. Jorgens had been drooling into his beard. Both were in disarray with zippers unzipped and clothing untucked. It was easy to tell when a person was falling to pieces in the mountains; they came apart at the seams" (151).

Although Abe does not seem to suffer from the exposure to the elements quite so much, more and more often he notices his own falling apart, or rather his gradual degradation to primitivism:



Abe was already sweating under the pack straps, deep in his own animalism. Even if he could have thought in full thoughts, he wouldn't have dared. Ascent hurt too much at these heights. Abe had never had to fight his own body this way. The aches and pains were bad enough. The lassitude was worse. He wanted to obey his instincts. He wanted to go down. But that was unthinkable. He concentrated on brute primary motion. He kept his mind slave-empty. (155)

The mountain catches Abe unawares in a peculiar way: he starts hallucinating, although Abe does not realize it at the time and is just "startled to the extent his apathy allowed" (155) that Daniel has appeared from nowhere and is climbing beside him. Hallucination does not contribute to Abe's composure, even less so when he is brought back to reality in a rather brutal way: being caught by a falling rock and realizing that he has fouled his pants. He looks like a mean caricature of a hero-climber, totally pitiful. But Abe seems relatively unabashed by it and sees it as a new experience.

The romantic image of a climber is further deconstructed through the changes climbers undergo, through an intellectual degradation and their descent to primitivism. However, the wilderness leaves the moral world intact and even somehow makes things simpler, the division between good and evil clearer. The extent of the wilderness' influence on the climbers' mental abilities is truly seen through Abe's eyes when, after a hundred days living in nobody's land he sees a Land Cruiser, a sign of civilization<sup>46</sup>:

For nearly a hundred days now they had lived like the native denizens of this strange, lost nation called Tibet. They had lapsed into a pack of trolls, mountain beings who were ugly and twisted and hunchbacked beneath the sun. All their great works of music and literature had been shucked as incomprehensible. These days, instead of Proust and Milton, they applied themselves to Conan the Barbarian comic books, scrupulously reading and rereading key balloons. It could take a full evening to complete one issue. (201)

In this remoteness, at this height, with the deprivations, love acquires a different meaning, or rather it loses its meaning on the mountain. What matters most is the sense of warmth and belonging. Abe, lying in one sleeping bag with Kelly, his beautiful climbing mate, is longing not for sexual intimacy but for a comfort of just lying close to a human being. Moreover, the mountain seems to deprive climbers of anything which could be even remotely associated with sexual appeal. The mountain makes the climbers a part of itself:

Her [Kelly's] hair smelled almost entirely of smoke and sweat and human grease and Abe inhaled it. She smelled like an animal. Before this, he'd never thought about how much mountain air smells like a mountain, like snow and still rocks and ice sweating under the stars. Nor had he ever craved human company so

---

<sup>46</sup> The term "civilization" has an ambiguous meaning here, since it is civilization that has brought atrocities to the Tibetans who are "savages" in the eyes of the Chinese.

fundamentally. Up here it was the sight of blood or the smell of raw humanity or a simple embrace that married you to what you had become, an animal on a mountain.

Love reduced to this quiet possession, then, this touch and shared warmth. (215)

The aspect of love is touched upon in the novel on several occasions but mostly the notion of love is reduced to, or rather substituted by the feelings of warmth and that of the presence of the other. Thus, in the storm, Abe is taking special care of Kelly even though his strength is failing him because – as in the night with Diana – he doubts his ability to survive alone. In both instances, it is a purely psychological dimension since on both occasions he is the stronger one: “[h]e couldn’t afford to lose Kelly. Things were getting stranger by the minute, and his sole comfort was in being able to watch over her. Love had nothing to do with it. This was altruism stripped bare. The only way he could identify his own welfare anymore was by looking after hers” (229).

A few hours before the final attempt to summit Everest, Abe takes in the sorry picture he, Gus, Kelly and Daniel make: Kelly is helpless because of her snow-blindness, Abe has just come to after quite a stretch of time spent in delirium because of his long exposure to the elements and a lack of oxygen, and Gus “looked broken to pieces by the combat. The sun and wind and fatigue had cut her face into separate parts, and the parts were coming unglued” (236). Daniel is still full of strength and determination to top the mountain but he is facing the necessity to descend with the others because climbing alone to the top means almost certain death.

One of the crucial aspects of mountaineering is the relationship between a climber and a mountain, which mostly takes an antagonistic form. Part of such relationship is an obsession, a fierce desire to conquer, which is the strongest drive. But “once a climber turns her face from the mountain, there’s nothing more to argue. Without faith, without obsession, a climber was no more than bait for disaster” (237).

When disaster does strike and an avalanche engulfs Daniel, Gus, Kelly and Abe, Abe is confronted with his worst fears, which, he realizes, are to meet Diana’s fate – being eaten alive by the mountain:

But then he drew a breath. It was a wracked, burning suck of air, and with it he plunged into hell. For half his lifetime, Abe suddenly knew, he had been dreading this moment, when he would face the fate of the lost girl Diana. Yet now, like a wasp capturing an insect alive for her young to feed upon, the Mother Goddess had enclosed him in her core. The mountain was going to feed upon him through eternity. (241)

At first, Abe might be seen accepting his fate stoically, heroically, but immediately it turns out to be another way of de-romanticizing Abe's image, or making him more human and less heroic: at the thought of being trapped in the guts of the mountain and facing Diana's death as his fate, Abe is overwhelmed by such a wave of panic that he faints, comes to and faints over and over again, and once he is fully conscious again, he contemplates the possibilities of committing suicide, which, in his situation, is easier said than done.

### **Other Climbing Characters: Daniel**

*The Ascent* presents a wide variety of climbers' characters, but Daniel Corder is the most prominent of them and is the central figure in Abe's narrative, that is why he deserves a closer look.

Put against his climb-mates, Daniel cuts a peculiar figure: the expedition members are in the climb with their whole hearts but Daniel seems to be even more so. As Abe once mentions, to most other people the climbers seem kamikazes, but Daniel seems to be the ultimate one. In the course of his preparations for the expedition, Abe goes through medical files of his charges-to-be. Daniel's record makes a gruesome picture:

Daniel's medical record read like a masochist's ode to the wilderness. Their former physician had listed Daniel's injuries in careful reverse chronology. Like a résumé, which made it easy for Abe to construct Daniel's story. Abe skipped through the list at random.

Eight years ago Daniel had elected to have arthroscopic surgery on both knees, one at a time, for cartilage torn by years of humping big loads down big mountains. And the year before, he'd spent three weeks hospitalized for malaria contracted in New Guinea.

Around that same time, surgeons had fused part of his spinal column after he'd fallen and collapsed several vertebrae. There was a note that Daniel would be bringing along a TENS unit, a portable battery-powered device that electrically overrode chronic, localized pain. Killing two birds with one stone, the surgeons had taken the same occasion to cut the nerves in Daniel's toes to address the pain of his Morton's neuroma. Climbers liked their rock shoes so tight that they sometimes developed hammer toes, similar to the effects of Chinese foot binding. That was back when Daniel still had toes.

In 1984, the records showed, Daniel had spent several months in the hospital getting most of every toe amputated because of frostbite. [...] The frostbite had occurred on Everest, in Tibet, on the north side, in 1983. [...] In fighting their way down the valley to a Tibetan village each had suffered major frostbite. Each had lost toes, three had lost fingers, and one had lost portions of his lower legs. Afterwards, so the story went, all of the climbers had given up climbing, all except one. Now Abe knew. Daniel was that one.

[...] The severity of pain and debilitation ebbed and flowed on the page, and Abe had to remind himself that this was the profile of one man, not an entire ward.

The list went on. It was grotesque. [...] Here was the sort of obsession he'd [Abe] always associated with Himalayan ascent, and it was written in flesh and blood. The other members might have the same passion, but only here did Abe see proof of a heart and mind whipped by demons. (50-51)

Climbing is an obsession and it is not uncommon in the climbing world that people continue climbing even after very severe injuries. There are a number of climbers who pursue their obsession using specialized devices after their limbs have been amputated due to frostbite or after their spinal cord has been irreparably damaged. For example, a New Zealander named Mark Joseph Inglis lost both his legs below the knee due to severe frostbite received on Aoraki/Mount Cook. Several years later, Inglis was back climbing big mountains. In 2006 he became the first double-amputee to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

Although Abe is familiar with Daniel's medical record of countless surgeries to repair the damage done while climbing, when he sees the marks on Daniel's body, Abe is shocked nevertheless:

Abe took stock. A gruesome furrow tracked along Daniel's spine and there were purplish surgery scars on his shoulder and the half-moons where they'd gone after the tendinitis in his elbows. There were other old marks on his arms and hands, and compared to these gouges and furrows and purpled seams, Abe's own climbing scars looked like the hesitation marks of a fake suicide. (173)

Before the *puja*, the *tulku* turns his glance to Daniel, and Daniel grows rather uncomfortable under the glance. The *tulku*, who is believed to fight demons seems to recognise those of Daniel's, and as he "continued studying Daniel's blue eyes with some cryptic recognition, [...] Daniel looked strangely off-balance" (134). Abe is astounded to see in Daniel what he has never thought is possible: "the look of a hunted animal. Daniel was afraid of this boy and his eerie recognition" (136-37). It becomes quite clear that for Daniel, the ascent of Everest by the Kore Wall route is not simply another item on the list. This climb, in case it is successful, can free Daniel from his demons that have been haunting him since the tragic fall some 17 years before. And to be freed from them, Daniel needs to share the climb with Abe, who, from Daniel's point of view, is possessed by the same demons, is marked for life by the same loss.

Daniel is so caught by his need to conquer Everest and to be the first to climb the Kore Wall, that no price is too high for him. Such an approach scares other team-members who then withdraw because of their fear that Daniel will kill them. For the

first time the topic is addressed by Thomas in one of the higher camps when the strength starts to run low and tempers short. He characterizes Daniel's type of climbers: "'I've seen this before,' Thomas said. 'High altitude kamikazes. You try to keep up with them. But nobody can. A guy like Coder can use up a whole team before people say enough. Slow down. And by then it's too late'" (147).

Although Everest is a very treacherous adversary, Thomas is intimidated by Daniel more than by the mountain. And what seems to make Daniel even more dangerous in the eyes of some of his team-mates, is that he possesses immense energy and unebbing optimism which make him a strong magnet, drawing people to him, making them yearn for his recognition. The problem is that others lack his strength but, being driven by Daniel's belief in success, are willing to die for the climb. Later on, after experiencing the murderous violence of the mountain, but seeing Daniel's eyes "glittering with summit fever" (172) and considering pushing on only because Daniel thinks Abe is capable of doing so, Abe begins to understand the others: "[w]hat had scared Thomas off was the sudden recognition that he would become willing to die up here, not for this mountain with its pure diamond light and not for his own glory and benediction, but rather for Daniel, for the sake of freeing one soul from its cage" (181).

Abe does escape Daniel's influence for a time, but Gus is another case. She is ready for anything to save Daniel. She stays with him on the mountain even when Abe goes down, as the further ascent seems ridiculously dangerous in the condition they all are.

Almost two weeks later Gus brings the news that Daniel has reached Camp Five, the last in the line and the one within the sight of the summit tripod. Gus also says that Daniel is waiting in ABC for the others to make the final bid together. The D-day on Everest depends on weather conditions. Teams oftentimes wait for weeks for the possibility of a final push. Having a very good chance of reaching the summit of Everest and turning one's back on it in order to ascend with the team-mates appears a very noble move, especially for such a climbing addict as Daniel, who is obsessed with reaching the top by this particular route. But Abe suggests a different motive of Daniel's altruism:

Daniel could just as easily have continued on the last thousand feet to the tripod alone. Instead he had roped down to join hands with his teammates and take the Kore in a classical finish. Abe knew it was a gamble, Daniel turning his back on a solo flash that must have seemed a sure thing. But apparently it wasn't as much a gamble as lone wolfing through the rest of his life. Even now, several

days later, Gus looked relieved by his decision. She really thought she could save him, Abe thought. Bravo, Gus. (198)

Surprisingly, it turns out that for Daniel it is not enough to have Gus on his side. In order to be released from the past, Daniel wants to share the rope with Abe. He does not seem to realize or to care about the suffering he causes Gus by betraying her in such a way. Yet, Gus is ready for such sacrifices and she bears stoically that “[a]lone and wary, she’d had to carry the news of it down ten miles and then deliver it to the man chosen to replace her” (199). At first, Abe refuses to dump Kelly and share a rope with Daniel, but after the first failed attempt of Daniel, Gus, Stump and J.J., Stump and J.J. go straight down, Kelly turns snow-blind and Gus is exhausted beyond recovering, “watching over Daniel had exhausted her” (237). Yet Daniel insists on ascending. He does not care about anyone or anything in his obsession to conquer the Kore Wall. The fact that Gus cannot continue, does not make him turn back. Gus, understanding that she will not be able to deliver Daniel his summit, is suffering incredibly: “Abe watched the gravity steal into her eyes. It was like watching a person die, a terrible and private twilight” (237). Nevertheless, she is ready to pay a dear price trying to make sure that Daniel will have another bid at the summit: she insists on taking care of Kelly, thus depriving Abe of excuses not to climb with Daniel. Her obsession with seeing Daniel to his summit, thus freeing him from the haunting past, can only equal Daniel’s desire to reach the top. The price is irrelevant, be it sacrificing herself or others:

Having exhausted herself trying to deliver Daniel his summit, Gus was simply making certain her lover had a replacement. Regardless of what had just been said, Gus was definitely sacrificing. She was giving away her second try with the calculation of a kingmaker, and she was giving away Abe’s fear and maybe his life and, who knew, maybe even Kelly’s life if it depended on his medical know-how. Gus was willing to sacrifice them all, herself included, in order to get Daniel to his salvation. (237)

Yet the avalanche destroys everybody’s plans. Abe is buried in the snow and only after a long time is miraculously found by snow-blind Kelly. When Daniel starts to dig Abe from the avalanche debris, he notices Daniel’s anger. Only when Abe thanks Corder for searching for him past any reasonable time,<sup>47</sup> Daniel’s mood seems to change somewhat. Suddenly, it dawns on Abe that what Daniel is feeling is not anger, it is repentance: “[i]t was guilt, of course. He had nearly left another partner to die. Daniel resumed the task of resurrection. His pace was furious” (244). Reaching the top of

---

<sup>47</sup> A chance of finding an avalanche victim alive drastically falls after half an hour to an hour. Abe was found more than 3 hours after the avalanche.

Everest is Daniel's one chance at redemption, at being free from the ghost of dead Diana, a metaphorical attempt at freeing Diana from the mountain she was trapped in. But while trying to 'save the dead girl,' he comes close to abandoning another of his climbing partners. When indirectly confronted by Abe, Daniel goes livid: "'I wasn't leaving you,' Daniel exploded at him. But he had been leaving, that was plain to see. Until this moment Abe hadn't known how utterly wrecked the man was. Gus had been right. Daniel could not afford his own memories" (245).

Having experienced defeat, pain and utter exhaustion, Daniel, the hero turns into Daniel, the mortal more and more. He is devastated by what has happened to Gus and much more so by what she has done, what act of betrayal she has committed by giving the *tulku* to the Chinese, in order to give him his summit. He blames himself for what Gus has done and holds himself responsible for pushing Gus to such a desperate measure.

As Abe, Kelly, Daniel and Gus progress from the abandoned ABC to Base Camp, accompanied by a demented yak-herder with his two remaining yaks, Abe watches Daniel falling apart: "Daniel was in ruins. He performed the tasks Abe gave him. Otherwise he seemed puzzled and uncertain. He never strayed out of eye contact with Gus's body, and at night he guarded over her" (257).

The climb, which has also been an attempt to free Daniel from his demons, has turned into a complete disaster after the avalanche and Gus's injury, leading to the subsequent amputation of her leg above the knee. But the issue of the *tulku* has not been resolved yet. When Daniel awakens to this reality besides Everest and the accident, he realizes that he is the reason why the *tulku* has been given to the Chinese. Thus, he has another innocent victim on his count. Daniel makes a wild attempt to free the boy, which results in a gun pointed at his face. Abe understands that spiritually Daniel is now an even greater wreck than he has been before. But at this moment, he silently pleads with Daniel thinking that "[t]his was unfair. They had tried to free Daniel. Now was his turn to free them. He should let them go home" (268). But before the climbers could go home, the *tulku* has to be freed. And when the climbers see the boy again, the problems of civilization return to them:

All the simplicity they had earned, all their separation from the world outside, was ruined by this boy's reappearance. They were haunted, not by his death but by his life. It was a mean sentiment, Abe knew, but an honest one. No one, from climbers to Li to the weary soldiers, wanted to deal with this anymore. The monk would not let go, though. (269)

Neither would Daniel. After getting down from the mountain and especially after Gus's amputation, Daniel has become very restless, "[g]odforsaken" (272) even more than before. He feels guilty of betraying the monk to the Chinese, and even more so because he unconsciously pushed Gus to deliver the boy to the authorities for him. Daniel knows that the monk is a dead man and is beyond saving, has been so before he first turned up in the camp. Yet Daniel feels that they all owe something to the boy and decides on a last act of mercy they, the Westerners, can offer to the *tulku*: not letting the Chinese get their hands on him by bringing him over a pass to Nepal.

Daniel is very close to carrying out his plan: he almost reaches the pass into Nepal when Abe and one of the Chinese soldiers catch up with him, at least close enough to establish eye contact. The soldier, enraged by his inability to reach Daniel (they are separated by only a hundred yards but this stretch is a pure surface of ice with a slight incline, which makes it impossible to cover without crampons), shoots at first at the already dead monk and then discharges his rifle into the air. This is followed by a huge avalanche, which may have been triggered by the shots, or may have been a mere coincidence. Abe knows there is no rescue for Daniel but at the same time this avalanche is understood as the ultimate salvation for Daniel. Otherwise he would have been a tormented soul even more than before, having to account for Gus's gruesome injury and the monk's death at the hands of the Chinese in addition to being haunted by Diana's ghost. At the end, Daniel is relieved of his sufferings and he achieves peace, as he has always wanted to, with Abe 'on the other end of the rope.' Facing the avalanche and his certain death Daniel finally feels in peace with himself and the world:

Abe threw one final desperate glance up the pass, and there he discovered Daniel in search of him. Daniel knew better than to run. He looked calm up there, with only thing on his mind, this glance from Abe.

And so it was. The last thing Abe saw of Daniel was the same thing Daniel saw of him, two upraised arms, hands reaching. (284)

### **Susceptibility to Superstitions**

The shocking revelations, the intimidating landscape, and the physical privations at "the world's highest dead end" (62) account for the changes in the climbers' attitudes towards each other, to the outer world, to notions of right and wrong or love and dignity, human mortality and their place in the world. Constant reiterations of the thought that the climbers are now in a totally different world offer an explanation of the necessity for the climbers to modify their ethical views. Thus, the surroundings start to



determine and define the climbers' actions and beliefs, making them, for example, more susceptible to superstitions, which surfaces in the climbers' presentiments even when everything seems to be going smoothly:

Every one of them was feeling overextended and no one could quite explain it, not for a climb that was going so well.

"We're like casualties waiting to happen," Robbie said. "You'll see. The machine will start to break down. Then it all becomes a matter of forward momentum, how far can we go before we stop." (128)

And so it happens that at some point for no good reason everything seems to start breaking down: the climbers come down with various maladies, the Sherpas are scared by the fall of one of them, although the man walks off uninjured. This sequence of incidents becomes more and more difficult to explain away as a mere bunch of coincidences: "[t]hings happened on mountains that couldn't be explained and humans weren't very good at letting that be" (125). The climbers and even more so the Sherpas start seeking some supernatural reasons behind the latest happenings and remedies against them. And since "so much depended on sheer faith up there" (124), "they [the climbers] had begun replacing science with superstition. Some had taken to refusing all medicine, relying instead on their crystals and vitamins and herbs" (110). But this does not seem to have helped much, and after a row of unpleasant incidents the climbers are only too happy to be comforted by the ceremony of blessing, the *puja*, offered by a boy who needs to be saved himself.

The *puja* and the attitude of the climbers to it, reveal the depth of the superstitions dwelling in the hearts of those who don't seem to have any fear. In an argument with Jorgens, who says that they have to do the way the Chinese would like them to (that is, not to have the *puja*), Carlos underlines the necessity of the blessing: "This is Tibet, [...] And this is Everest. And we need a *puja*. You go climbing in these hills without a *puja*, you're asking for trouble" (135). For Abe such an approach seems a bit childish, primitive, but at the same time moving because "hard-core mountaineers could be in such a state over a good luck ceremony. He figured they couldn't really take this *puja* business seriously. But when he looked around, there was satisfaction on people's faces, a quiet relief that had been missing since their arrival. Even Gus seemed more at ease" (136).

For the blessing the *tulku* chooses a god who very accurately embodies everything the climb means and is indicative of the most covert motives uniting the mountaineers on this climb:

Black and ferocious, the god was a demonic creature with six arms and a rosary of human skulls. He held numerous weapons and his head was surrounded with a halo of flames. He was drinking brains from a skull. [...] Carlos said it made perfect sense.

“Mahakala – Gompo, to the lay Tibetans – he’s the Great Black Lord of Enlightenment,” Carlos said. “He’s a killer, but also a protector. He defends us against selfishness and slaughters the demons of ignorance. On the Tibetan hit parade of deities, this guy scores in the top three. He’s the perfect symbol of killing the self to achieve knowledge. Rebirth out of destruction, all that good stuff.” (142)

The notion used by Carlos, the “Black Lord of Enlightenment” corresponds to the Blakean idea of the enlightenment: it is not pure and light but dark, sinister, trying a person in terms of the blackness of the heart.

The issue of mortality preoccupies the expedition members even more before a difficult part. The subject is not openly discussed but every effort is taken in order to prevent deaths. Thus, climbers are susceptible not only to the *puja* ceremony and prayer flags but also to other omens, like bad dreams. Before the final push Kelly has a bad dream and she shares her fears with Abe that something is going to happen on the mountain. She has seen a long-haired woman, tangled in a rope, hanging upside down and is sure that she is going to die on the Hill. Kelly is the only one to voice her misgivings, but Abe has noticed the same mood in others: “an unusual somberness had been afflicting the other climbers in the last two days, and now he realized that it was apprehension” (213).

The apprehension only increases as the climbers move along: the hurricane wind seems virtually to suck Abe and Kelly up the mountain and Abe “couldn’t shake the feeling that he and Kelly were being drawn into an ambush” (228). Their premonition turns into an expectation of a disaster when Abe and Kelly get to the uppermost camp and turn their gazes to “a thick wide shelf of snow that had accumulated three or four hundred feet above the camp. It probably held a thousand tons of snow, a perfectly formed avalanche ready to cut loose. Then Abe saw similar pockets coiled all along on the downsloping tiles. The whole region was primed for a catastrophe” (230).

This ominous sight makes the climbers feel as if sitting on a time-bomb and the reports from the Base Camp just make the ticking louder: in a radio call Carlos mentions that the yaks have been acting funny the whole day through and then just bolted, which, according to the yak herders is a bad omen.

All the superstitions are shown to be valid. The machine Robbie mentions does break down: climbers get sick, their progress is slowed down and then the news comes

that all the foreigners have to be escorted out of the country, thus the summit attempt has to be abandoned. When the climbers do get permission to go to the top, they find out that the *tulku* has been found by the Chinese. Moreover, close to the summit of Everest an avalanche hits Abe, Kelly, Daniel and Gus. All survive, but Gus' leg has to be eventually amputated. At the end of the novel, Daniel dies in another avalanche.

### **Climbing Philosophy**

Tibet and the Everest region are seen as the world's highest dead end or even as a different world. The landscape of the mountain defines but also is defined by a new set of notions and principles, which, at this end of the world, acquire a peculiar quality: time seems to turn liquid as in S. Dali's pictures, the categories of right and wrong are much more difficult to outline; people change, being reduced to the state of primitivism in terms of appearances, language, the things that matter to them. But in this way mountains seem to bring out the more essential, inner qualities of the men. Social status, financial success and good looks, so much sought after "down in the World" (32), become insignificant.

The rules of the outer world cease to exist or are modified to fit the reality of this one. The mountaineers are concerned with the ethical questions of right and wrong, but seem to differ in their attitudes ranging from "there's no right or wrong in the mountains. [...] That's just whatever happens" (32) to the opinion that it is up to the mountaineers to establish a paradigm of moral principles. Thus in the debate whether to use a hut, a former monument now close to collapsing, as a latrine Gus argues that it would be indecent: "Jorgens scoffed and said everything and nothing was proper up here on Everest. And Gus replied how that was the point, it was up to them to decide what was right and what wasn't [...]" (86).

Although it is up to the mountaineers to define the propriety of their actions, they are to a great extent influenced and determined by the surroundings. The mountains tend to diminish the values of civilization, for instance, looks, prosperity, connections, etc. and substitute them by or impose the values which may bear less importance in the outer world, like courage, reliability, physical and psychological strength, foresight, etc. When the climbers are exposed to the wilderness, they seem to grow wild themselves: love gives in to the longing for warmth and the sense of security; sophisticated conversations are reduced to monosyllabic 'shop talk,' and simplicity and superficiality the team-mates used to mock J.J. for, become greatly appreciated on the upper reaches of Everest.

It is easy to trace outer changes and developments of characters experienced by the mountaineers. Despite the lack of knowledge about the region and this side of Everest, no one has any illusions regarding the price they will have to pay for the sheer

possibility of the ascent. In this line, there is a foreshadowing of the outcome, understood to be Abe's feeling that "Everest was about to ravage them" (64). Already during the first night at ABC, Abe cannot help but draw parallels between the team and a primitive tribe: "[t]hey may as well have been a tribe of Neanderthals piled one against another in a cave" (117). Gradually the mountain is taking its toll of the climbers. They turn into a herd of starved, battered, primitive nomads, with appropriateness of appearance being only a dim recollection. Abe thinks about the effect of the mountain on his mates and what they have turned into:

They were turning to bone and gristle. [...] Their hands had taken on the horny, banged-up look of roughneck's hands. The pads were cut and fissures spread like drying mud and simple scrapes ulcerated. Their fingernails had quit growing or were just continually chipped and worn down. Every cuticle was split and bleeding as if their fingers were rejecting the very nails, spitting them loose. (127)

The climbers realize themselves what a sorry picture they make, but physical tortures and deprivations are seen as unavoidable obstacles in their search for intrinsic rewards: the sense of achievement, the exorcism of their inner demons, a sense of belonging, which seems to acquire a higher meaning in this hostile environment. Against such things a piece of skin or bone is but a small sacrifice:

Abe tried in vain to remember what they'd looked like before. Like Himalayan deities, their skin had turned blue, the higher they climbed, the lusher the blue. [...] At supper, pieces of fried skin fell from their faces into their food. Their eyes had grown huge and hungry behind their goggles and glacier glasses. The mountain had spawned a pack of maniacs, it seemed, zealots. The mountain will fall, Abe thought. To people like these it will fall. *And he was one of them.* [emphasis added] (127)

The need to belong and its importance are stressed throughout the novel, especially through Abe's figure, who treasures this feeling of belonging and seeks to confirm it over and over again, be it a share in carrying loads or in a complot,<sup>48</sup> when one night Abe is called to a yakherders' tent to a young boy in a coma with a weird combination of injuries, ascribed by Abe to an epileptic seizure. When Daniel finds out about Abe's patient, Abe realizes how naïve he has been. The boy is a *tulku*, a monk, and his wounds are from tortures in a Chinese prison which he has managed to escape. If the liaison officer finds out about the monk, he would be sent to prison again. To avoid it, the whole team is informed of the circumstances. Thus, the climbers turn into political conspirators, and the affair just strengthens the sense of unity and belonging within the

---

<sup>48</sup> The climbers agreed to help the yakherders treat the *tulku* and hide him from the Chinese officials supervising the expedition.

group. The sense of belonging is further deepened by a ceremony of blessing, *puja*, offered by the *tulku* when he feels a bit better.

The feeling of belonging is extremely important to Abe, who is delighted to be accepted by Daniel as an equal on a difficult climb. Abe feels exhilarated at the thought that they are together, they are brothers now (see 159). Abe is also pleased when Daniel is impressed at the load Abe is carrying. For Abe there is nothing sweeter than this recognition and the feeling that “he belonged” (162).

### **Spiritual Corruption**

The situation with the *tulku* opens another aspect of right and wrong to the climbers, though most of it only retrospectively. Abe, who is in this region for the first time, marvels at the landscape and Tibetan ghost villages the team passes. At this literal end of the world, which seems so spiritually virgin, Abe is for the first time confronted with Tibetan-Chinese history, told by one of the team members, Carlos Crowell, an ex-Peace Corps hand. And Abe, like most other team mates who do not want to think about history, at first refuses to believe the massacres and other horrible things done by the Chinese to the Tibetans. He refuses to pass judgement on or be emotionally involved in the issue:

Most of the other climbers tended to treat Carlos’s colourful spiels about the holocaust that China had unleashed upon Tibet as ghost stories rather than real history. The stories were fabulous and gruesome and no one paid much attention except for Jorgens, who had instructed Carlos to zip his yap once they crossed the border. (56)

The team mates dismiss these stories as being too remote from their own reality, or too troubling, warding off these tit-bits of reality by the simple “we are not involved in it, we’ve just come to climb.” But they cannot separate climbing and history in this case because then they turn into the Silent Majority, and by their attempt to climb Everest, the expedition is “renting the mountain from a regime that doesn’t even own it. Paying lip service to butchers” (57), thus in a way supporting the holocaust. In this case, the climbers, who generally tend to be very apolitical and, to a certain extent, asocial, can no longer simply close their eyes and pretend to be ignorant. They have to decide what is right and what is wrong and to adjust their actions to the situation, thus establishing their paradigm of right and wrong.

The climbers consider the injuries inflicted upon the *tulku* by the Chinese outrageous but regard the policy of their non-involvement in the situation as correct, conveniently withdrawing from it by saying that everyone has his Everest to climb. Yet in the case of the *tulku* the climbers do get involved in the Chinese-Tibetan problem on the Tibetan side by not taking sides with the Chinese and by not handing the *tulku* over to the Chinese as well as by keeping silent. But the climbers fail to set the priorities correctly, defining the importance of the climb as higher than the importance<sup>49</sup> of the *tulku*'s life. The climbers become guilty of the *tulku*'s death by not helping him escape from Tibet. The *tulku* has been so savaged by the Chinese that there was only a very feeble hope he would survive at all. At first the climbers stick to the principle "everyone has his fight to fight" but they are all appalled by Gus' actual exchange of the *tulku*'s life for the possibility of an ascent. For Gus, however, it is not the ascent *per se*, it is the exchange of the dying *tulku*, doomed to fail in his attempt to cross the high passes to Nepal, for a chance of freeing Daniel from his inner demons, thus "sav[ing] the ones you can save" (141). When the *tulku* is captured again and the question arises whether the final push to the summit should be made or not, Gus argues for the ascent, saying that by coming back to the camp, "[...] the monk made his choices. And we made ours" (223). Still the question remains: how far can one go and still remain within the bounds of 'the right.'

The subject of crime and punishment is newly touched upon and left temporarily unanswered from the perspective of whether ignorance absolves from responsibility. The climbers have been notified that they have to leave the country before they finish the climb. Then, suddenly, Li changes his mind and announces that the expedition members have 10 more days to attempt the summit, providing a rather obscure explanation for a person of his mind-set that "there are things in life that require finishing" (208) and that "it is wrong to punish the innocent" (209). The change of hearts and the explanations seem weird to the climbers, but they get what they have desired most and do not want to look for more plausible reasons of Li's decision, calming themselves by the question "'Does it matter?'" (209). At the end of the novel, the reader is led to the conclusion that such things do matter. The mountain seems to answer the question by offering what can be understood as 'punishment' for wrongdoing. This theme often surfaces in mountaineering literature.

---

<sup>49</sup> The importance of a human life vs. the climb presents a bigger topic in mountaineering at the moment due to many incidents such as this, where dying climbers are not helped, not even given the last comfort as it can jeopardize the climb.

Abe contemplates on the issue of the monk and comes to a conclusion that they, the expedition members, were to blame for the monk's fate. They are guilty of his tragic fate and eventually of his death not because Gus has traded the kid to the Chinese for a chance to reach the summit but because they all have acted as the Silent Majority, reluctant to have their peace of mind disturbed:

For the boy had been in danger since the moment he appeared in their camp. He had come to them bleeding and in rags, and they had done nothing but give him a clean expedition T-shirt and a baseball cap and stick Band-Aids on his torture wounds. That and their silence was supposed to have screened this frail, lone child from the Chinese wind. What had they been thinking? (273)

It is Daniel who voices the issue. He finds no rest and questions the decision of the expedition members as well as their priorities in his conversation with Abe, and although Abe has posed exactly the same questions to himself, in conversation with Daniel he tries to justify the decisions made by the expedition:

“All he wanted was to get over the mountain,” Daniel said.

“We did what we could do.”

“You know that's not so,” Daniel said.

“It's done now.”

“I keep thinking, what if we'd just got him over the mountain?”

“Daniel, it was too late.”

“I mean before it got too late. I mean instead of working the summit. We would have got this one poor bastard out of hell. We could have, you know.” (275)

The value of a human life is an extremely topical issue nowadays in the mountaineering community, brought about by a number of incidents in the last few years. The topic reached its climax in 2006 and was called the David Sharp controversy. David Sharp, a distressed climber on Everest, was left to die on the upper reaches of the mountain after it had been decided that the rescue efforts would be useless and would only cause more deaths. This case was preceded by several situations when distressed climbers (especially if they were considered past saving and were not members of the same team) were left behind as their rescue could have jeopardized the chances of an expedition to reach the summit. Similar instances are described in Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and by Beck Weathers in his *Left for Dead*, where the author himself became the victim of such an attitude on Everest in 1996.

The devastation through earthquakes, avalanches, precarious descents and exposure to vicious storms, Abe feels, have left the party of four irrevocably changed. Yet he believes that the implication of moral betrayal, the senseless loss of life, the price of the



summit have left more scars. Abe again feels the human smallness as compared to nature: “[h]e [Abe] was changed. They all were. What they suffered was worse than defeat. They had been believers – richly pagan in their devotion to the mountains – but the earthquakes had exposed their foolishness. They had lost their faith. Abe could see his despair in others” (258).

Abe feels that the climbers have put value on the wrong things. He is tormented by many questions: was it worth to buy the way to the summit at the price of the monk’s life, even if his life was nothing more than a flicker of a dying candle? What is climbing worth if it has been marred by betrayal, even if it was meant well and for the others’ sake? What are the ideals of climbing? Is climbing a mountain a worthy ultimate goal? Do the climbing values bring only disillusionment? Does this expedition result in the loss of the Blakean innocence? Is the whiteness of Everest there to create a stronger contrast to the blackness of one’s heart? The close summit reveals negative character traits, for example, a failure to offer the last comforts to someone beyond saving but still alive. Thus the question, also raised in numerous fiction and non-fiction texts, arises: should the expedition be carried on because the person is beyond saving and by trying to help where there is no help, jeopardize the success of the expedition<sup>50</sup>?

When Abe makes it to Base Camp ahead of the rest of the group in order to get help, he sees many changes in the camp: the signs of devastation and utmost depression in the camp as well: the usually cheerful mess tent has turned gloomy, all good feelings sapped from the rest of the climbers. The picture is rather disheartening:

It looked like a bomb shelter in there. Part of one wall was lined with the remains of their gear and food. At one time the expedition pantry had lacked for nothing. Now they were ransacking the last of their stock.

Abe searched around the others. Through J.J.’s parka, he saw white tape binding his rib cage. Thomas was slumped over the table behind a curtain of derelict hair, eyes bloodshot. Robby lay propped in one corner with huge frostbite blisters bubbling across his fingers. An ancient man leaned forward from the shadows. It was Jorgens, emaciated. In the space of a week, he had aged a quarter-century. (258)

The mood in the camp becomes somewhat better when the climbers find out that no one has died but they do not have much time to grieve over a lost summit because the mountain did claim its toll: Gus has been badly injured in the avalanche and has

---

<sup>50</sup> Such expeditions are extremely expensive and are mostly the source of immense pressure on the leaders and guides whose career or even life could be destroyed in case of failure, as well as on the paying clients, who sometimes have to sell or mortgage houses and give up jobs and that is why they have only one try at the summit.

suffered severe frostbites during the descent, which led to gangrene. The damage is irreparable and her leg has to be amputated to the knee. Besides, Gus has lost her baby in the avalanche, but only Abe knows about it. Daniel is beside himself with grief, but the rest of the climbers feel relieved because “[t]hey were saved from a summer beneath Everest. They could all get on with their lives. They could get on with their forgetting” (274).

It is a recurring theme in mountaineering literature that a person who has committed a crime is punished in a way. In this case, too, the crime is more of a moral rather than legal category; natural law is an ethical theory according to which, “the moral standards that govern human behavior are, in some sense, objectively derived from the nature of human beings” (Himma).

Usually the punishment takes the form of an accident or a natural disaster. Superstitions play a considerable role. The cause and effect relation is not explicit, but can be traced quite easily.

Whereas the moral assessment of such aspects whether it is right or wrong to close eyes to the crimes one was not a witness to can be debated, betrayal is a moral crime in everyone’s eyes. On the eve of the final push the climbers find out why they have been granted permission to stay ten days longer: it is their reward for turning the *tulku* in to the Chinese and on hearing the news everyone is disgusted. The suspicion falls on Jorgens since he has been the last one who talked to Li: “[t]he ugly charge hung in the air like the smell of sulphur after a lightning strike” (220).

There is a premonition of something bad about to happen: the weather is holding the climbers hostage and the yaks in Base Camp are acting weird. Because of dangerous conditions on the mountain and ailments J.J. and Stump abandon their attempt to reach the summit and descend. Kelly suffers from snow blindness, Abe is close to delirium and Gus is so whipped she decides to turn her back on the mountain and let Daniel climb with Abe, thus making Daniel’s long time wish come true. Abe would rather go down but yields to Gus’ reasoning that Daniel cannot climb alone: “[h]aving exhausted herself trying to deliver Daniel his summit, Gus was simply making certain her lover had a replacement. [...] Gus was willing to sacrifice them all, herself included, in order to get Daniel to his salvation” (237).

Abe decides to climb with Daniel also because he believes that in this way they both can be saved: “he’d [Abe] felt the night in his heart for too long, exactly as long as

he'd known Daniel. It was time for them to escape, together. A thousand more feet of climbing and they would break through to the sun" (238).

Yet the avalanche destroys all the prospects of summiting and even the hope of ever reaching ABC. In the face of a probable death Daniel reveals to Abe his beliefs as to the reasons of the disaster: it is Gus's moral crime of trading the kid-monk for a possibility to reach the top, "[s]he had sacrificed a child to this mountain. Worse, she had done it for love" (255). The punishment has been severe, but it is Gus who has to pay very dearly for her betrayal by losing her leg, her baby and Daniel.

Abe has been eager to climb the mountain and to see Daniel climb the mountain in order to be freed from the haunting past, but after the last revelations Abe is glad that "[a]t least they had not climbed the mountain. That would have been obscene" (255). Daniel tries to redeem Gus' wrong-doing and to compensate for his misjudged actions by bringing the *tulku*'s body over the passes to Nepal, but there is an indication that Daniel again does it not for the *tulku* (as he was not climbing for the sake of climbing). He does it to save himself and to get rid of his inner demons, thus to earn redemption through this achievement.

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

As in every book on climbing, be it fiction or non-fiction, the meaning of climbing and the reasons for it are considered in *The Ascent*. In the novel, the topic of climbing is discussed in relation to the ultimate summit in the mountaineering world, Everest. Every member of the expedition has his/her reasons for wanting to climb Everest. In a more general sense this desire can be explained by the concept of ‘virgin territory’ or ‘terra incognita’ (see 179), as well as by the warrior instinct (see Evola 4-5), supplemented by individual reasons:

Abe was getting a clear sense that one brought to Everest a lifetime of battle plans, of occupied landscapes – high ground, always the high ground – and of risks, blood and wet socks on cold nights. Taken altogether, it was a kind of high-speed imperialism, the rise and fall of a dynasty within a few months. The idea behind their occupation was less to inhabit a land than to enter into history. (77)

Abe’s dramatic experiences during the rockfall, the intimidating landscape and the feelings of being reduced to a primitive, and losing track of time make him muse about the meaning of the climb and its intrinsic rewards. He also contemplates the sense of enlightenment he and his climb mates were hoping to find on Everest and comes to the conclusion that it feels very different from what he thought it would while imagining the climb:

Now that he was here, over twice as high as Mount Olympus, 8,000 meters seemed impoverished, hardly Olympian. Far from anointing them, the mountain had reduced them to virtual idiots, with spit on their faces and shit in their pants and scarcely enough wind in their lungs to complete a full sentence. He tried to remember what treasure he’d come to find. Everest was supposed to have bestowed on him all the sacraments in one, baptizing and confirming and confessing him all at once. But the only blessing he was likely to return home with was a piece of red string tied around his throat by an epileptic in yak skins. So much for glory, he thought, and paid out more rope to Daniel. (163)

In the case of Daniel and Abe, the supplementary reasons for climbing, and climbing Everest as the ultimate achievement, are conquering the demons of the past. Throughout the novel the theme is just under the surface and is directly addressed at one of the dramatic points: Daniel has taken a potentially deadly fall. He has survived, but the fall has left him and Abe injured,<sup>51</sup> which combined with fatigue after a serious climb, has

---

<sup>51</sup> Daniel cracked several ribs; Abe received a deep cut to his forearm with Daniel’s crampon, which caused the loss of blood and a near pain shock.

made the situation rather dangerous. This state of things seems to make Daniel, and Abe with him, question their personal reasons for climbing.

Daniel's wishes and needs seem to define those of his fellow-climbers, especially those who readily subject themselves to his influence, that is Abe and Gus. For Daniel, any climb is a metaphorical attempt to free the ghost of Diana from the ice trap, in this way freeing himself from the haunting ghosts. Since Abe and Daniel are marked by the same absence, the same death, Daniel believes that he has to climb Everest together with Abe because for Daniel climbing Everest on that particular route is a crusade to save his tormented soul. As Gus defines it, Daniel has come to bury Diana (see 176). Gus came to help Daniel bury the ghost and to win Daniel for herself because "she was Daniel's archangel and would never leave him" (180), so starting the climb, "they were striking pacts with their individual demons, honing a radical arrogance and rising upon their whims" (126).

Seeing Daniel's determination to continue up the slope, although common sense is yelling that ascending is equal to suicide, Abe feels a weird enthusiasm and a stupid yearning to follow Daniel and to help him get rid of the ghosts, but at this realization he gets scared:

For a moment, Abe considered tearing the bloody bandage off his own arm, pouring Super Glue into the slit and continuing up with Daniel. But even at the thought, a chill went through him and he realized that it was this from which Thomas had fled down the mountain. It wasn't Daniel's natural authority up here that had driven Thomas away, nor that this black-haired kamikaze was berserk for ascent. No, what had scared Thomas off was the sudden recognition that he would become willing to die up here, not for this mountain with its pure diamond light and not for his own glory and benediction, but rather for Daniel, for the sake of freeing one soul from its cage. Daniel had led them so high they were nearly out of air and yet he was still aimed at the sun and they were still following. (181)

Eventually, Abe does manage to break his dependence on Daniel and to descend, thus joining the rest. In a couple of days Gus comes down as well and announces that Daniel has managed to place the last camp and to secure the chance of reaching the summit. Abe reflects again on the meaning of the climbing and moreover, of reaching the summit, suggesting that the mountain is a metaphor for obsessions, individual for each climber: "[t]o control the mountain was to control the entire pyramid of obsessions that had led to it. None of them yearned for that power more than Daniel" (198). But Abe is unprepared for another of Daniel's obsessions: his wish to summit the mountain with Abe. Yet Abe questions the legitimacy of Daniel's belief that the final climb, sharing a

rope with Abe, will help them “to lay the past to rest once and for all” (199). In this respect, Abe is haunted by misgivings that even if he consents to Daniel’s wish, it may not be enough to bury the past or save Daniel’s soul as “[f]orgiveness was something granted, not attained. It was not the same as reaching a mere mountaintop” (199). And still, reaching this mountaintop, and reaching it sharing one rope, seems to Daniel and Abe a way of defying the ghosts of the past and burying the dead they share. This understanding dawns on Abe at the moment when Gus is insisting on his taking Gus’ place beside Daniel. For Abe, the climb to the summit with Daniel is a way to break the fatal bond to him. Unfortunately, Abe is not to reach the top of Everest as he is engulfed by the avalanche. But as he is lying motionless and helpless, trapped in the avalanche, he manages to see a goal reached: “I have become the mountain, thought Abe. He was pleased. It was the ultimate union, the mountaineer with his mountain. He felt saved” (242).

### *Into Thin Air*. Jon Krakauer

#### The Book

Jon Krakauer, 54, is an American writer and mountaineer who became famous through his outdoor articles in *American Alpine Journal* and *Outside*, and through the books *Eiger Dreams* (1990), *Into the Wild* (1996) and finally *Into Thin Air* (1997).

*Into Thin Air* is one of the best-known expedition accounts to Mount Everest and deals with probably the most dramatic moments of Everest history. Then, in May 1996, during a storm on the upper reaches of the mountain nine climbers lost their lives on a single day. By the end of the season twelve people had died on Mount Everest. The author lost four of his teammates. Jon Krakauer was a client and a journalist on the Adventure Consultants Guided Expedition on assignment for *Outside* magazine to participate in and to write about a guided ascent of Everest. After completing his article for *Outside*, however, Krakauer felt the need to return to the subject and write a more extensive account. In the Introduction to *Into Thin Air*, the author explained his reasons for writing the full account of the expedition:

[...] I attempted to put Everest out of my mind and get on with my life, but that turned out to be impossible. Through a fog of messy emotions, I continued trying to make sense of what had happened up there, and I obsessively mulled the circumstances of my companions' deaths. [...] The Everest climb had rocked my life to its core, and it became desperately important for me to record the events in complete detail, unconstrained by a limited number of column inches. This book is the fruit of that compulsion. (xi-xii)

Krakauer confided that even long after the expedition, what had happened on Mount Everest “was gnawing [his] guts out” and the book was to be “an act of catharsis” (xii).

*Into Thin Air* initialized Krakauer's printed dialogue with Anatoli Boukreev<sup>52</sup> and his co-author G. Weston DeWalt, continued in *The Climb*,<sup>53</sup> Boukreev's account of the expedition and his response to Krakauer's accusations. The two expeditions interacted throughout the climb and shared the ropes to the summit of Everest. Yet, it is rather curious that Krakauer, being a member of the Adventure Consultants Everest Expedition, which lost four climbers during the climb, is more concerned about possible mistakes and failures of the Mountain Madness Everest Expedition guides.

---

<sup>52</sup> Anatoli Boukreev was the head Everest expedition guide on the Mountain Madness Everest Expedition, a team attempting the summit on the same day. Due to this fact, the two teams combined their forces in fixing ropes on the route, etc. The two teams were bound by the same circumstances on the climb and were ravaged by the same storm.

<sup>53</sup> *The Climb* is considered in the following chapter.

While highly regarded for its literary merits, *Into Thin Air* has the reputation of a well-done journalistic work rather than a climbing account and was received with some reservations by the mountaineering community.

Krakauer's account of the 1996 Everest tragedy is prominent through its style, with the interfusion of factual information and eloquent descriptions of the magnificent landscapes, the powerful presentation of dangers and perils and the graphic depictions of bodily reactions to them. The descriptions evoke strong mental images through memorable metaphors, vivid adjectives and telling similes.

Jon Krakauer is a client of the Adventure Consultants Guided Expedition led by a New Zealander, Rob Hall. This is a commercial expedition to the summit of Everest guided by Hall himself and two junior guides, Mike Groom and Andy Harris. Beside the author, there are further seven clients on the team, most of them possessing climbing skills and experience inferior to those of Krakauer. Generally speaking, the team consists of relatively inexperienced amateurs driven by very strong ambitions to reach the top of the world.

The Adventure Consultants Expedition is one of the many to attempt Everest in 1996. To avoid major traffic jams on the fixed ropes, certain summit dates are allotted to each expedition. Hall's team is going to share the summit day and the ropes with another expedition, The Mountain Madness Guided Expedition, led by Hall's old acquaintance, the American Scott Fischer, assisted by Anatoli Boukreev and Neal Beidleman. The team consists of eight clients. Fischer's clients seem to be by far more experienced and self-sufficient than those of Hall.

To secure the most favourable conditions for the summit assault, the climbers choose a short window of good weather just before the monsoon starts. Additionally, to avoid a 'traffic jam' on the fixed ropes, all expeditions agree to attempt the climb only on the dates allotted to every particular group. A further security measure observed by the Adventure Consultants expedition is a pre-determined turn-around time, meaning that no matter how close to the summit the climbers are at a specified time (in this case 2 p.m.), they have to turn around. Who cannot resist the lure of the mountain and turn around, is very probably going to die. As the leader of the expedition correctly points out, "With enough determination, any bloody idiot can get up this hill, [...]. The trick is to get back down alive" (147).



On the summit day, despite all precautions, the traffic jam on the highest reaches of Everest cannot be avoided, which makes the climbers spend more time on ‘borrowed oxygen’<sup>54</sup> than they would have liked to, and, combined with exposure to the elements and fatigue, makes the situation more dangerous. The problems increase in number and severity as a heavy storm hits the mountain. Eventually four members of Hall’s team will die, including Hall himself and another guide, Andy Harris. Another member of Krakauer’s team, Beck Weathers, is left for dead<sup>55</sup> but manages to survive, having suffered extreme frostbite. The Mountain Madness expedition loses Scott Fischer. Anatoli Boukreev manages to save several clients after continuous attempts to find them in the total white-out in the storm.

The reasons of the tragedy are considered to be human mistakes and a sudden spell of bad weather which developed into a ferocious storm. Additionally, insufficient climbing skills and experience of some of the clients that also led to a bottleneck on the fixed ropes. Because of this traffic jam many climbers had to waste valuable time and oxygen while waiting for their turn to ascend/descend. The turn-around time agreed upon was not observed either, thus numerous expedition members found themselves exhausted, out of gas and out of day-light up on the mountain when the storm struck, which changed a critical situation into a catastrophic one.

Apart from narrating the events on Everest in 1996, Krakauer attacks Anatoli Boukreev for allegedly disregarding his duties as a guide and strongly criticises him for his decisions<sup>56</sup> on the summit day. The main points of criticism are that Boukreev climbed without the use of supplemental oxygen, which, in the author’s opinion, may have impaired Boukreev’s guiding and that he descended to the tents ahead of his clients.

---

<sup>54</sup> Very few climbers can climb above 8,000m without supplemental oxygen. On that particular climb a stash of oxygen was made on the South Col with the calculation that the gas climbers carried in their packs would get them to the summit and back to the stash. Those who used bottled oxygen and lingered, risked running out of gas in the middle of the climb which would inevitably lead to a quick deterioration of their physical and mental abilities and to their death.

<sup>55</sup> Beck Weathers was considered to be beyond saving, and it would have been too dangerous for the rescue party to try and bring his body (as he was not expected to survive) down. As it was feared that another bad storm was coming, it was thought too risky to wait with Weathers for him to die. This situation and the decision are similar to the ones described in the opening scene in *The Ascent*. The rescue party leaves Diana because a heavy storm is coming, and Abe, keeping vigil at the girl’s side, is not expected to survive.

<sup>56</sup> Krakauer seems to be the only one to criticise Boukreev’s actions and decisions to date. Krakauer’s motives are not quite clear as he received explanations to each of his questions but disregarded them. For his heroic deeds on Everest Boukreev was awarded the American Alpine Club’s highest honour, the David A. Sowles Memorial Award.

### **The Landscape of Climbing**

The Everest region is considered to be, if not one of the most beautiful, then undoubtedly one of the most imposing landscapes, prominent by its expanse and its void. In general opinion Mount Everest, despite its being the highest mountain in the world, is not considered a particularly picturesque mountain because “[i]ts proportions are too chunky, too broad of beam, too crudely hewn” (15). But Krakauer sees the mountain’s grandeur and derives his aesthetic pleasure from its dimensions and power because “what Everest lacks in architectural grace, it makes up for with sheer, overwhelming mass” (15). The author remembers a preconception of Mount Everest fashionable in his mid-twenties as a “‘slag heap’ – a peak lacking sufficient technical challenges or aesthetic appeal” (21), an opinion he used to share and repeat due to a lack of experience. Now, from the perspective of maturity, Krakauer is awed by the majesty of the mountain and is critical of “the postmodern era” (22) which has robbed Everest of its mysticism and has substituted for it commercialisation and trivialisation:

Over the past half decade, the traffic on all of the Seven Summits,<sup>57</sup> but especially Everest, has multiplied at an astonishing rate. And to meet the demand, the number of commercial enterprises peddling guided ascents of the Seven Summits, especially Everest, has multiplied correspondingly. In the spring of 1996, thirty distinct expeditions were on the flanks of Everest, at least ten of them organized as money-making ventures. (22)

In this way, Krakauer, being a client of a guided expedition himself, summarises and shares the opinion of climbing traditionalists and purists that Everest is being “sold to rich parvenus,” “debased and profaned” (23). Nevertheless, Krakauer is himself thrilled by the opportunity to climb Everest.

Modern Everest reality has brought changes to the ways of travelling on expeditions. To avoid the traditional long trek to Everest Base Camp, which could take a few days, Krakauer, together with the rest of the Adventure Consultants guides and clients, gets a helicopter ride to Lukla. From Lukla, the expedition members trek to Everest Base Camp through a chain of little Sherpa villages where they get to know the Sherpa culture and every-day life, teeming with colourful flags, unfamiliar customs, meditations and holy men. In one of the villages, Krakauer and several of his companions visit “the head lama of all Nepal,” as one of the expedition Sherpas

---

<sup>57</sup> The Seven Summits are the highest mountains on each continent.

explains, to receive a blessing. This ritual is often described in expedition accounts (e.g., *Upon That Mountain*) as well as in fictional narratives dealing with climbing in the Himalayas. For example, just like the climbers in *The Ascent*, Krakauer and his companions yield to the local superstitions but also are relieved to obtain talismans. Another curious parallel between fictional *The Ascent* and non-fictional *Into Thin Air* are the figures of holy men: just as the *tulku* from the former narrative is exhilarated over an orange expedition cap given to him by Daniel, so is the head lama in the latter deliriously happy over Western trifles such as his photos with Richard Gere and Steven Segal, the souvenirs from his first trip to the USA shortly before.

Soothed by the ritual and overwhelmed by the beauty and remoteness of the place, the author experiences a sense of bliss in this foreign environment, brought about by amazing scenery and by the feeling that his dreams are slowly coming true:

The first six days of the trek went by in an ambrosial blur. The trail took us past glades of juniper and dwarf birch, blue pine and rhododendron, thundering waterfalls, enchanting boulder gardens, burbling streams. The Valkyrian skyline bristled with peaks that I'd been reading about since I was a child. [...] Unburdened and unhurried, caught up in the simple joy of walking in exotic country, I fell into a kind of trance [...]. (48)

Despite such a feeling of happiness, Krakauer, like Abe in *The Ascent*, is made uneasy by the constant impression of being watched by the mountain. The author, like Abe, is only too well aware of the things Everest could do to a living creature, thus “the euphoria seldom lasted for long. Sooner or later I'd remembered where I was headed and the shadow Everest cast across my mind would snap me back to attention” (48). Another aspect making this marvellous landscape even less benign is the statistics the author comes across: even a trek through this exotic scenery can be deadly and people die even on the trail, for instance, from acute altitude illness.

The atmosphere changes from mountain glory to mountain gloom as the expedition proceeds, and the last trace of green gives way to ice and to stone monuments – “memorials to climbers who had died on Everest” (51), which serve as a warning for climbers to come. The idyll is gradually ousted by the increasing aura of doom and danger, and the sense of alienation brought about by “a barren, monochromatic expanse of rock and wind-blown ice” (51). Remoteness, desolate landscape and elevation have a great psychological and physical impact on the narrator: “despite our measured pace I had begun to feel the effects of altitude, which left me light-headed and constantly fighting for breath” (51). The atmosphere grows heavier when expedition yaks stumble up the frozen trail but often break through the crust and

get stuck to their bellies. Besides, the cheerfulness of the lower villages has been left behind and now the climbers have to bivouac in a “spectacularly filthy lodge” (51). As described in *The Ascent*, this environment produces an impression that the world has been left behind.

The picture becomes even more drastic as the effects of a bottleneck produced by numerous expeditions at the last village before Base Camp, Lobuje, are revealed. Due to heavy snowpack all expeditions attempting Everest from Nepal are crammed in a tiny village, transforming it into a wasteland. A similar experience is described in *The Ascent* when Abe sees Base Camp on the Tibetan side of Everest. The mountain ceases to be the symbol of the majestic and the pure; it seems smeared with the refuse of civilization, and is taken apart and utterly de-romanticized. In this way, the contrast between high aspirations and low reality is especially powerful:

The three or four stone toilets in the village were literally overflowing with excrement. The latrines were so abhorrent that most people, Nepalese and Westerners alike, evacuated their bowels outside on the open ground, wherever the urge struck. Huge stinking piles of human feces lay everywhere; it was impossible not to walk in it. The river of snowmelt meandering through the center of the settlement was an open sewer. (51-52)

Krakauer's expedition experience is further 'enriched' by a night in the filthy lodge packed solid with Sherpas, sharing his sleeping bag with countless bed bugs and developing a cough caused by smoke from heating with yak dung to last him until the end of the expedition. By the end of their three-day-stay in the village, almost half of the expedition members have come down with virulent intestinal ailments. The strong contrast between Krakauer's description of the place and reports by the early Himalayan explorers like George Mallory, Eric Shipton or Edmund Hillary, makes one believe that Everest and the Everest region have lost the charm and glory they used to emanate in the old days. They too have become de-romanticized and stripped of their mystique and beauty.

Despite malign human influences, the landscape of the mountain retains its prominence through its vastness, alienation and power, posing a danger not only to strangers but even to the 'natives' of Everest. A foreshadowing of the implications of climbing on Everest is offered at the very beginning: a message is delivered that one of the expedition Sherpas has fallen into a crevasse and is badly injured. The feeling of being cut off from the world while on Everest is strengthened by the fact that even

helicopter rescue is impossible because of the terrain<sup>58</sup> and the Sherpa has to be carried down by the climbers. The episode lets the climbers realize that now they are, to use a phrase from *The Ascent*, ‘outside the World.’

To contextualise his impressions of the mountain as a hostile and desolate country, Krakauer uses the words of Thomas F. Hornbein, a prominent American mountaineer, from his expedition account *Everest: The West Ridge* (1965) as an epigraph for the chapter on the landscape of Everest: “[a]ll that one could see and feel and hear – of Icefall,<sup>59</sup> moraine, avalanche, cold – was of a world not intended for human habitation. No water flowed, nothing grew – only destruction and decay.... This would be home for the next several months, until the mountain was climbed” (57).

The author, like so many before him, is repeatedly flabbergasted by natural powers, be it meltwater which “sluiced furiously down innumerable surface and subterranean channels, creating a ghostly harmonic rumble that resonated through the body of the glacier” (58), or the glacier with “a bizarre procession of freestanding ice pinnacles the largest nearly 100 feet high, known as Phantom Alley. Sculptured by the intense solar rays, glowing a radioactive shade of turquoise the towers reared like giant shark’s teeth out of the surrounding rubble as far as the eye could see” (59).

Against such a background Base Camp itself is a relatively cheerful place, made colourful by hundreds of tents with a cosy mess tent stuffed with all portable Western conveniences like a stereo system, a library, a satellite phone and fax, an improvised shower, etc. The camp lies in a natural amphitheatre, flooded with sunlight by day. Yet, the feeling of unease is produced by surrounding “forbidding mountain walls.” As soon as the sun disappears, the temperature drops considerably, the sound of “immense ice avalanches that thundered down at all hours of the day and night” and “a madrigal of creaks and percussive cracks” (59) from the glacier under one’s feet are a constant warning that the mountaineers are behind the enemy lines and no mistake will be forgiven.

Krakauer addresses the issue of garbage on the mountain, presented rather unfavourably in numerous books and articles, and questions the common impression of Everest Base Camp as a trash site, pointing out that it is not so dirty at present, the credit for which he gives to commercial expeditions. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the South Col, the launching pad for the summit assault at 26,000 feet. Although by now successful efforts have been made to clean the South Col of hundreds and

---

<sup>58</sup> This problem is caused by a lack of lift the air can provide for helicopter rotors at such altitudes.

<sup>59</sup> The Khumbu Icefall is sometimes called the Icefall.

hundreds of discarded oxygen bottles, among other things, at the time Krakauer attempted the summit it did look much like a trash dump. The sad sight is also described in *The Climb*, where the tents were erected “amid a scatter of hundreds of depleted oxygen canisters jettisoned by previous expeditions” (Boukreev 124). Such a sight intensifies the ideas of the wasteland and hostile environment unfit for humans because discarded canisters are a constant reminder to the climbers that they will not survive without oxygen.

At length Krakauer describes the horrors and dangers experienced on the way through the Khumbu Icefall to Camp One. The Icefall is the most feared place on Everest and there is no way around it, only through. The biggest danger in the Icefall is explained by the name itself: chunks of ice, reaching at times the size of several trucks, fall down because of the Icefall movement down the mountain and the influence of the elements. In his account Krakauer expresses reservations towards moving through the Icefall, very similar to those found in *The Ascent*, in Shipton’s *Upon Than Mountain*, and in Hillary’s *High Adventure*, and describes it as petrifying and unpredictable:

The movement of the glacier in the Icefall has been measured at between three and four feet a day. As it skids down the steep, irregular terrain in fits and starts, the mass of ice splinters into a jumble of huge, tottering blocks called *seracs*, some as large as office buildings. Because the climbing route wove under, around, and between hundreds of these unstable towers, each trip through the Icefall was a little like playing a round of Russian roulette: sooner or later any given serac was going to fall over without warning and you could only hope you weren’t beneath it when it toppled. (76)

The fact that the Icefall is tethered by ladders and ropes in order to provide more security for the climbers is only half as reassuring as it might seem because due to the constant movement of the glacier the ladders eventually become dislodged, broken or swallowed by collapsing parts of the Icefall, this “frozen, groaning disorder” (103). Even the security of Camp I above the Icefall cannot give Krakauer his peace of mind because he is petrified at the thought that he has to cross the Icefall at least seven more times.

The extreme danger and treachery of the place make Krakauer see it almost in the light Thomas Burnet saw the mountains centuries before – as places of ruin and destruction not suitable for a human being. Besides, the mountain is thus seen not merely as a dangerous terrain but is personified and made into the ultimate adversary. Krakauer shares a popular concept of the mountain as a living and thinking being,

exercising its will, having full control over whom to grant its summit and whom to toss from its side. The author quotes this vision of the mountain found in the writings of other climbers, for example, Eric Shipton in his *Upon That Mountain*: “[p]erhaps we had become a little arrogant with our fine new technique of ice-claw and rubber slipper, our age of easy mechanical conquest. We had forgotten that the mountain still holds the master card, that it will grant success only in its own good time” (5).

In this light, the landscape ceases to be a mere landscape with obstacles to be overcome. It is seen as a Sphinx guarding the entry to the summit sanctuary.

Like numerous mountaineers before him, Krakauer, as an Everest novice responding to the perils on the route, relates his fears regarding the challenges posed by Everest. Unlike early climbers, Krakauer describes his unequivocal feelings about climbing the Icefall in terms of bodily functions, once again reminiscent of Abe’s reactions,

[i]f the Icefall required few orthodox climbing techniques, it demanded a whole new repertoire of skills in their stead – for instance, the ability to tiptoe in mountaineering boots and crampons across three wobbly ladders lashed end to end, bridging a sphincter-clenching chasm. There were many such crossings, and I never got used to them. (78)

Resorting to the bodily functions in the attempt to relate strong feelings is a relatively modern development and is not to be found in the writings of George Mallory, Eric Shipton, Sir Edmund Hillary or the like, whose confessions of even the worst fears or panic fit into the romantic canon and never feature any belittling descriptions.

Krakauer’s contemplations about extreme dangers posed by the Icefall are interrupted by Hall’s comment that “‘The route’s a bloody highway this season’” (79), which raises the question of what crossing the Icefall when it is in a *bad* shape can look like. The further Krakauer goes, the scarier the route gets: the climbers have to find their way past gargantuan, perilously balanced seracs, as massive as a twelve-storey building (see 79), to cross gaping crevasses and to avoid the hidden ones, etc. At such moments Krakauer is especially critical of his own dismissive attitude towards Everest he used to have before joining the expedition. Only now does he fully understand what threats and difficulties are lurking everywhere on the mountain.

Once in Base Camp, Krakauer tries to provide a detailed picture of the camp day-to-day life and to relate the implications of spending much time in an environment hostile to a human being. Such descriptions are quite common in any expedition account and are usually found when the first couple of days of acclimatization are chronicled.

However there are hardly any descriptions of the acclimatization process in the books written by professional mountaineers. For example, Hillary's account includes only short comments on him or his companions feeling slightly under the weather due to the altitude.

Krakauer's recollections on his first days in Base Camp again strongly parallel those of Abe in *The Ascent*, both having only marginal experience with prolonged stays at altitudes close to Base Camp. Krakauer recounts his misery of acclimatization in a rather expressive way:

Despite the many trappings of civilization at Base Camp, there was no forgetting that we were more than three miles above sea level. Walking to the mess tent at mealtime left me wheezing for several minutes. If I sat up too quickly, my head reeled and vertigo set in. The deep, rasping cough I'd developed in Lobuje worsened day by day. Sleep became elusive, a common symptom of minor altitude illness. Most nights I'd wake up three or four times grasping for breath, feeling like I was suffocating. Cuts and scrapes refused to heal. My appetite vanished and my digestive system, which required abundant oxygen to metabolize food, failed to make use of much of what I forced myself to eat; instead my body began consuming itself for sustenance. My arms and legs gradually began to wither to sticklike proportions. (67)

It has to be noted that Krakauer is much better off than most of his teammates, who have had to fight gastrointestinal disorders and severe headaches in addition. It is repeatedly emphasised how alien and hostile the place is and a climber is not only confronted with visible obstacles and dangers, but is equally influenced by thin air and by the burning sun. On a bright day the sunshine is so intense that one can get severe sunburns, become snow blind or get bad headaches. The author describes a number of these symptoms from his own experience.

Although technically not as demanding as some lower mountains, Everest's greatest challenges are high altitude, exposure, the Death Zone,<sup>60</sup> the treacherous Icefall, ferocious storms, and the mountain's sheer vastness and remoteness from the outer world. Life is rough and primordial here. Like in *The Ascent*, as a warning to those entering this forbidding world, the mountain occasionally belches corpses of unfortunate climbers: on the trail above Camp I the author comes across a body, supposedly a Sherpa who died 3 years before. Just a thousand feet above the camp, Krakauer comes across another body in the snow, "or more accurately the lower half of

---

<sup>60</sup> Altitude above 25,000 feet or 8,000m. As Krakauer points out that a human picked up from sea level "[...] dropped on the summit of Everest, where the air holds only a third as much oxygen, would lose consciousness within minutes and die soon thereafter" (152).



body” (107). It is difficult to imagine the malicious force able to rip a human body into two but it becomes obvious that for the mountain it is as easy as can be. The hostility of the place is additionally underlined by the fact that from Camp III (24,000 feet) on the members of the Adventure Consultants expedition start using oxygen, even for sleeping. Without it the body is too vulnerable to potentially lethal HACE, HAPE,<sup>61</sup> hypothermia, frostbite and the like. Any prolonged stay in the so-called Death Zone will inevitably lead to a rapid deterioration of the physical condition and eventually to death. Thus climbing Everest is always a race against time and a struggle against the elements on the barren terrain where “everything not frozen in place [...] has been blasted into Tibet” (161) by hurricane force winds. All these aspects combined make the upper reaches of Everest a very inhospitable place which influences the climbers’ bodies but even more so their psyche, bringing their fears to the surface. Krakauer writes that “[i]f there is a more desolate, inhospitable habitation anywhere on the planet, I hope never to see it” (161).

The descent from the mountain is even more strenuous than the ascent and drains Krakauer of his last energy, causing hallucinations and a disturbing feeling of warmth, indicating extreme hypothermia. The author is mildly aware of his deteriorating condition and comments retrospectively: “[g]radually, I became aware that my mind had gone haywire [...] and I observed my own slide from reality with a blend of fascination and horror” (193). The author becomes soon so exhausted and disoriented that he just sits down instead of mastering the last precarious stretch of inclining ice before the camp. In his condition Krakauer does not realize the dangers he is exposed to, nor the time he has spent sitting around. For him time has become liquid.

Undoubtedly, one of the most remarkable features of the Everest landscape is its summit. Yet when Krakauer finally gets to the top of the world he unmask the mountaineering cliché of intense elation which is supposed to be triggered by summiting Everest. The author, like many others, for example, Hillary, experiences a ‘disappointing summit’ because due to Krakauer’s extreme exhaustion he “couldn’t summon the energy to care” (5). Thus the event and the sight seem rather anticlimactic at that moment:

---

<sup>61</sup> High Altitude Cerebral Edema - an illness induced by climbing too high too fast which causes the brain to swell from fluid leakage; High Altitude Pulmonary Edema – an illness induced by high altitude which causes the lungs to fill with fluid potentially leading to suffocation.

Plodding slowly up the last steps to the summit, I had the sensation of being underwater, of life moving at quarter speed. And then I found myself atop of a slender wedge of ice, adorned with a discarded oxygen cylinder and a battered aluminium survey pole, with nowhere higher to climb. A string of Buddhist prayer flags snapped furiously in the wind. Far below, down a side of the mountain I had never laid eyes on, the dry Tibetan plateau stretched to the horizon as a boundless expanse of dun-colored earth. (180)

Krakauer's only thought on the summit is that it marks the middle of the way to be trod. After days and days of exertion the author becomes stupefied, devoid of longings or ambitions; he carries on more by habit than desire and nothing can touch him much in his current condition. Even the fact that Krakauer is standing on the very top of the world cannot impress him. The only thing that matters is that it has been finally reached and now the author can turn around and descend. Analysing his stupor and inability to be stirred by the incredible views from the summit of Everest, Krakauer describes the extreme difficulties induced by altitude, dehydration, exhaustion and exposure:

I hadn't slept in fifty-seven hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding three days was a bowl of ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&Ms. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separated ribs that made ordinary breathing an excruciating trial. At 29,028 feet up in the troposphere, so little oxygen was reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired. (6)

Once Krakauer does get back to Camp IV safely, a ferocious storm bringing hurricane winds and a complete white-out enfolds the upper reaches of the mountain. In the course of the storm, four climbers of the Adventure Consultants and one of the Mountain Madness expeditions lose their lives. The storm is violent, but nothing extraordinary on Everest. Krakauer can barely stand from exhaustion after the summit, but his climb-mates are in an even worse condition, for example, Sandy Pittman, short-rope to Neil Beidleman "was so out of it that I'm not sure she even knew I [Beidleman] was there" (204). One of the Mountain Madness expedition members, Charlotte Fox, remembers the misery she had to bear: "[m]y eyes were frozen. I didn't see how we were going to get out of it alive. The cold was so painful. I didn't think I could endure it anymore. I just curled up in a ball and hoped death would come quickly" (208).

Upon coming back to Camp Four the guide Mike Groom "was able to communicate clearly, but it required an agonal effort, like a dying man's last words" (212). These are the climbers who had big luck. Many of their mates did not live to tell the story.

The mountain does not only sap at the climbers' powers but brings them into a state of confusion, with memories mixed and blurred. Thus, erroneously, Krakauer believes he has seen Andy Harris descend to Camp Four, but Harris is nowhere to be found. When Krakauer goes looking for Harris on the next day, he finds scratch marks from crampons on the edge of the mountain face and assumes Harris has fallen to his death. Only two months later does Krakauer manage to reconstruct the incident and realizes that it was Martin Adams he mistook for Harris, which only raises new questions:

Andy was a large man, over six feet tall and 200 pounds, who spoke with a sharp Kiwi lilt; Martin was at least six inches shorter, weighed maybe 130 pounds, and spoke in a thick Texas drawl. How had I made such an egregious mistake? Was I really so debilitated that I had stared into the face of a near stranger and mistaken him for a friend with whom I'd spent the previous six weeks? And if Andy had never arrived at Camp Four after reaching the summit, what in the name of God had happened to him? (220)

Thus physical privations and most of all the tragedy of Everest '96 left the members of both Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness expeditions badly shaken. They return changed: devastated by the loss, more aware of their own mortality, humbled by the expanse and immense powers of the mountain, contemplating the value and meaning of life, seeing the world as a unity where every person is responsible for his/her actions and decisions or the lack of actions or decisions. Everest has become an initiation experience for most of the climbers. None of the climbers has been the same ever since.

### **The Sublime**

From the very beginning of the expedition Krakauer is flabbergasted by the majestic and breathtaking views of Everest. At the same time the author is stunned by the vastness and forbidding landscape of the mountain, which make him realize the implications of a human being climbing to the heights of the cruising altitude of a pressurised jet (see 30). Krakauer feels small, insignificant and weak when confronted with the immense power and the size of the mountain: "[t]he ink-black wedge of the summit pyramid stood out in stark relief, towering over the surrounding ridges. Thrust high into the jet stream, the mountain ripped a visible gash in the 120-knot hurricane, sending forth a plume of ice crystals that trailed to the east like a long silk scarf" (30).

For somebody who used to think of Everest as not being particularly beautiful, nor technically challenging, nor as an ascent to credit a climber, Krakauer is overwhelmed by the mountain's view, caught unawares by the grandeur of panorama where Everest dominates the physical and psychological landscape. The author feels dispirited by the dimensions and omnipotence of the mountain, but even more so by the impression, very reminiscent of that voiced by the members of the Ultimate Summit Expedition in *The Ascent*, that the landscape of Everest is much more alien than that of any other mountain. To better render his emotions and the ominous grandeur of Everest, Krakauer makes extensive use of metaphors, similes, evaluative adjectives and vivid imagery:

Twenty minutes beyond the village I rounded a bend and arrived at a breathtaking overlook. Two thousand feet below, slicing a deep crease through the surrounding bedrock, the Dudh Kosi appeared as a crooked strand of silver glinting from the shadows. Ten thousand feet above, the huge backlit spike of Ama Dablam hovered over the head of the valley like an apparition. And seven thousand feet higher still, dwarfing Ama Dablam, was the icy thrust of Everest itself, all but hidden behind Nuptse. As always seemed to be the case, a horizontal plume of condensation streamed from the summit like frozen smoke, betraying the violence of the jet-stream winds.

I stared at the peak for perhaps thirty minutes, trying to apprehend what it would be like to be standing on that gale-swept vertex. Although I'd ascended hundreds of mountains, Everest was so different from anything I'd previously climbed that my powers of imagination were insufficient for the task. The summit looked so cold, so high, so impossibly far away. I felt as though I might as well be on an expedition to the moon. As I turned away to continue walking up the trail, my emotions oscillated between nervous anticipation and a nearly overwhelming sense of dread. (46-47)

The same combination of dread and veneration is sensed in Krakauer's descriptions of the Khumbu Icefall, extremely treacherous and unpredictable but equally magnificent, "a three-dimensional landscape of phantasmal beauty" with a "vertical maze of crystalline blue stalagmites" and "sheer rock buttresses seamed with ice pressed in from both edges of the glacier, rising like the shoulders of a malevolent god" (79).

Despite all the dangers and difficulties, the feeling of suffocation and a certain dullness of the senses induced by altitude and exhaustion, the author is time and time again overwhelmed by the majestic sights opening to him: "[t]he thin air had a shimmering, crystalline quality that made even distant peaks seem close enough to touch. Extravagantly illuminated by the midday sun, Everest's summit pyramid loomed through an intermittent gauze of clouds" (160).

On the one hand, Krakauer is tormented by his anxieties about the weather conditions, about the plume of snow blowing from the summit hinting at the ferocity of winds on the ridge. On the other hand, notwithstanding his heavy thoughts about the desolation and hostility of the place and about all the ways he can be killed on the way to the summit, the author cannot but be amazed at the majesty of Everest, which he describes with the help of superlative adjectives and imaginative metaphors:

The night had a cold, phantasmal beauty that intensified as we climbed. More stars than I had ever seen smeared the frozen sky. A gibbous moon rose above the shoulder of 27,824-foot Makalu, washing the slope beneath my boots in ghostly light, obviating the need for a headlamp. Far to the southeast, along the India-Nepal frontier, colossal thunderheads drifted over the malarial swamps of the Terai, illuminating the heavens with surreal bursts of orange and blue lightning. (165)

## **The Presentation of Character**

### **The Author and Other Climbers**

There are a number of climbers presented in *Into Thin Air*, ranging from absolute amateurs to mountaineers who know very little of life outside the mountains. The author is positioned somewhere in between: too inexperienced to attempt Everest on his own or within a group of 'serious' climbers but capable enough to be a strong client on Rob Hall's team. While narrating actual events, Krakauer presents the development of his mountaineering views and offers an overview of existing climbing philosophies. He also draws portraits of 'serious' climbers. The descriptions and characterisations present Rob Hall, Scott Fischer and Anatoli Boukreev as examples of such climbers.

Krakauer's vision of climbing and of the climber has undergone a certain transformation: from an idealist to a realist one. The author thinks back to his early climbing days as well as his climbing ideals and values he used to share with his companions. In those days the collective self-image appeared to be very romantic: pure and daring in terms of moral qualities and climbing techniques, with more significance put on ways rather than means:

The culture of ascent was characterized by intense competition and undiluted machismo, but for the most part, its constituents were concerned with impressing only one another. Getting to the top of any given mountain was considered much less important than *how* one got there: prestige was earned by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest style imaginable. Nobody was admired more than so-called free soloists: visionaries who ascended alone, without rope or hardware. (20)

Along with melancholy, there is an aftertaste of gentle mockery in *Into Thin Air* exercised by the mature Krakauer toward his younger self, for example, regarding the author's aspiration to be a 'serious' climber and the mountains worth his efforts (see 21). The good-humoured jibe suggests that the author has moved away from those ideals and adopted a more down-to-earth understanding of climbing. Now a well-established journalist and writer, Krakauer reflects on his early twenties when there was space for hardly anything but climbing. His younger self shows distinct parallels to and would fit into the character-scheme of a number of actual but also fictional climbers, such as Vernon Rand from *Solo Faces*, Daniel from *The Ascent*, Gordon Wilson and Alex Townsend from *Vortex*, Sankey from *Climbers*, etc., individuals living in some holes, doing odd jobs to finance climbing: "[i]n those years I lived to climb, existing on five or six thousand dollars a year, working as a carpenter and a commercial salmon

fisherman just long enough to fund the next trip to the Bugaboos or Tetons or Alaska Range” (21).

Taking into consideration this point of view, it is easy to justify the author’s slightly derisive tone regarding new developments in the mountaineering scene and its tendency toward commercialization of climbing, especially on Everest, which has led to the increasing number of incompetent clients unfit to be there.

Such evolution of the Everest reality has led to the establishment of the opposition of classes: ‘amateur climbers/clients’ and ‘serious climbers.’ In *Into Thin Air* three characters are presented as the ‘ultimate’ climbers: Rob Hall, the leader of the Adventure Consultants, Scott Fischer, the leader of the rivalling Mountain Madness expedition and Fischer’s head guide, Anatoly Boukreev. Each of them is a character representative of his class. All three men are predominantly described as nearly superhumans belonging to a tight circle of the enlightened, the ‘ultimate climbers,’<sup>62</sup> which means that the climbers either have met each other before or at least know one another by reputation. Thus, despite commercial rivalry the guides and leaders of the two expeditions can boast of good connections grounded on similar experiences, skills and ambitions. For these mountaineers camaraderie goes before business:

The sundry men and women who make careers out of scaling the world’s highest peaks constitute a small, ingrown club. Fischer and Hall were business rivals, but as prominent members of the high-altitude fraternity their paths frequently crossed, and on a certain level they considered themselves friends. (61)

Rob Hall is a ‘serious’ climber who arranges his life around climbing, a school drop-out who picked up odd jobs to support his climbing but finally managed to turn his obsession into his profession. Rob Hall has something cherubic about his face (see 31) and something ascetic about his manner. Yet beside such ‘divine’ features, he can boast of great organizational skills, natural authority, a creative approach to solving problems and determination – the features necessary to make a good expedition leader. He displays some flair for publicity and uses it skilfully in order to finance his next Himalayan expeditions. Yet Hall faces the problem his colleagues are equally confronted with: in order to remain the ‘ultimate climber’ and get new sponsorships or clients he has to raise the standards every time. As Hall’s friend put it, “[t]he next climb has to be harder and more spectacular than the last. It becomes an ever tightening spiral; eventually you’re not up to the challenge anymore” (33). To diminish the risks of becoming a climbing crash dummy, Hall tries to earn his living with Adventure

---

<sup>62</sup> Three other guides, Groom, Harris and Beidleman take up less textual space in *Into Thin Air*.

Consultants, a company founded by him and his climbing and business partner Gary Ball, specialising in guiding amateur clients to the tops of the Seven Summits.<sup>63</sup> Both Rob Hall and his friend are true climbers who live in the mountains and die there: Ball dies in Hall's arms on the ascent of one of the Seven Summits and is buried in a crevasse. Hall perishes and is buried three years later on the upper slopes of Everest in 1996. They constitute part of the myth of the 'ultimate climber': the whole life spent in the mountains trying to climb higher, faster, more daringly, and death found in the mountains, a death possessing "a romantic and noble quality" (51). This has become the fate of many great mountaineers, among them George Leigh Mallory, Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker, Andy Harris, Scott Fischer, Anatoli Boukreev. The myth of the ultimate mountaineer is further developed in fiction, where the climbers' fictional counterparts<sup>64</sup> live and die in the same way, for example, Daniel (*The Ascent*), Orion Phillips, Nicolas Rhodes (*Beyond the Mountain*), Sankey (*Climbers*), Jamie Matthewson (*The Fall*), to name but a few.

Along with Rob Hall, Krakauer portrays two additional guides employed by Adventure Consultants, who too fit perfectly into the image of a 'serious' climber: Andy Harris, who lives to climb and Mike Groom, an Australian, "a Brisbane plumber who worked as a guide only occasionally" (43), but whose passion for climbing could not be broken even by the amputation of all his toes after one of the climbs.

Like Hall, Scott Fischer is presented as a prodigy climber, an Alfa animal, "a strapping, gregarious man with a blond pony-tail and a surfeit of manic energy," who took up climbing at 14 and "placed climbing at the center of his cosmos, and never looked back" (62). Unlike Hall, whose brand mark is a methodical and fastidious approach, Fischer is portrayed as being famous for his "harrowing, damn-the-torpedoes approach to ascent" (62). He has "survived a number of frightening mishaps that by all rights should have killed him" (62). The author recounts a number of Fischer's escapades which feature falls of 80 to 100 feet, one of them resulting in an ice-pick puncturing his calf and "leaving a hole in his leg big enough to stick a pencil through" (62). Krakauer mocks the attitude Fischer has adopted towards his health and mortality, yet he does it in a way admiring and approving of this dare-devil life-style, defined by pushing oneself beyond

---

<sup>63</sup> Hall's entrepreneurial innovation led to the outcry against the commercialization of Everest from so eminent a figure as Sir Edmund Hillary, which deeply hurt but did not stop Hall.

<sup>64</sup> Here: a counterpart is a fictional figure that has similar functions, characteristics and experiences as a climber; however, the climber is not the prototype of that fictional figure.



any physical limitations, caring less about injuries and taking risks, at times disproportionate to his experiences, disregarding pain and just ploughing on. Fischer is presented as an idealist, a romantic figure with a “burning ambition to be a great climber, to be one of the best” (63) and doing everything it takes to become one.

Fischer as a romantic hero is created not only by his striving to become the best climber, but also by his “almost childlike enthusiasm” (63), “absence of guile” (63) and by his charismatic character: “[r]aw and emotional, disinclined toward introspection, he had the kind of gregarious, magnetic personality that instantly won him friends for life” (63). Fischer is reckless at times and not too squeamish about following the laws, but very powerful, enthusiastic, magnetic. Occasionally Fischer puts a toe across the line of law by smoking a lot of cannabis and by drinking more than is healthy (but not while working) (64), which makes him a rebel and thus even more likable. Fischer’s fictional counterparts are Daniel Corder from *The Ascent* and Vernon Rand and Jack Cabot from *Solo Faces*.

Anatoly Boukreev, the lead guide on Scott Fischer’s expedition, is portrayed as one of the strongest climbers in the world, with more than two decades of Himalayan experience and a number of high altitude ascents to his credit without the use of supplemental oxygen, two of them to the top of Everest. Raised in the tradition of the Soviet climbing school, he is used to mountaineering distinguished by self-sufficient (e.g., in a team but relying on oneself) and very tough and demanding climbing. But unlike Hall and Fischer, he is not comfortable with babysitting clients and supervising their every grip. He strongly believes that those unable to climb Everest without major help from a guide have no place on the mountain. Otherwise this could mean courting disaster.

Despite presenting Boukreev as one of the most accomplished mountaineers, Krakauer persists in his severe criticism of Boukreev and blames the Everest disaster on him, which is somewhat difficult to understand as it is Krakauer’s team that sustains the biggest loss, and it is Boukreev who saves several stranded climbers.

Krakauer himself belongs to the category of clients – climbers too inexperienced to try and climb Everest on their own. Krakauer can also be said to have a fictional counterpart in the figure of Abe Burns, the protagonist of *The Ascent*. Both climbers have comparable climbing backgrounds and are on their first Everest expedition. They

both have the advantage of being surrounded by more competent climbers with profound Everest experience. Yet unlike their veteran colleagues, Krakauer and Burns have to go through the ordeals of acclimatization and through psychological adaptation to such Everest realities as the treacherous Icefall or corpses of the unfortunate fellow-climbers on the trail, or the feeling of intense fear while facing danger. The two mountaineers also offer very similar observations about the influence of the mountain on their bodies and how “they were turning to bone and gristle” (Long, *Ascent* 127), with split ribs and burnt faces.

Such effects of altitude and exposure are felt by almost every climber, and even the strongest ones are not immune to small ailments or serious illnesses. Everyone is concerned about their health, but Everest novices are believed to be slightly too obsessed with their bodily reactions to and functions at high altitude. For example, Krakauer describes this aspect of mountaineering rather graphically in his book. As if offering a response to it Boukreev’s account includes a quote attributed to an anonymous base-camper pulling the leg of the first-timers on Everest: “People became totally self-absorbed, monitoring their bodies, whether they’re peeing or not, what their urine looks like, whether they’re pooping every day, whether they’re nauseous, whether they have a headache or not” (Boukreev, *Climb* 60).

Boukreev maintains that everyone is concerned about their health, including himself, but certain things tend to be exaggerated on Everest.

Notwithstanding many differences between the ultimate and the amateur climbers presented in this account, there are numerous features characteristic of both mountaineer types: one of the essential constituents of the climber’s character is his drive. Without it, without the will to overcome the next obstacle and to see around the next corner, without endurance and stoicism no mountain can be climbed. However, if overdone, such a strong drive is potentially deadly: “[a]bove 26,000 feet [...] the line between appropriate zeal and reckless summit fever becomes grievously thin. Thus the slopes of Everest are littered with corpses” (177). As the organization of an Everest expedition is very time-consuming and is connected with considerable financial expenses, it is extremely difficult for mountaineers to tame their drive, to overcome their ambitions and to turn their backs on the mountain, especially when being close to the summit. The decision to turn around demands sometimes more courage than to go on, and deserves great respect:

Taske, Hutchison, Kasischke, and Fischbeck<sup>65</sup> had each spent as much as \$70,000 and endured weeks of agony to be granted this one shot at the summit. All were ambitious men, unaccustomed to losing and even less to quitting. And yet, faced with a tough decision, they were among the few who made the right choice that day. (178)

Four of Krakauer's teammates never made it back to the safety of the tents, Rob Hall among them.

The tragedy evokes different responses from both categories of climbers, professional and amateur. Every person involved asks questions and examines his/her role in the events. Krakauer comes to the conclusion that guides are only humans too, and not the super-humans or heroes others see in them. They are not immune to the malevolent effects of altitude and exposure. The author castigates himself for his ready acceptance of a passive stance in order to avoid responsibility for decisions in critical situations. For example, on the descent, Krakauer and Mike Groom, a guide, fail to notice the symptoms of distress Andy Harris,<sup>66</sup> another of Hall's guides, is showing. It is the last time Andy Harris is seen and ever since Krakauer has been tortured by remorse. He confesses that "[g]iven what unfolded over the hours that followed, the ease with which [he] abdicated responsibility – [his] utter failure to consider that Andy might have been in serious trouble – was a lapse that's likely to haunt [him] for the rest of [his] life" (188). Krakauer, trying to digest the events of the expedition says that "[t]he magnitude of the calamity was so far beyond anything [he]'d ever imagined that [his] brain simply shorted out and went dark" (264). The mountain has a very lasting psychological impact on the author, filling him with survival guilt, with a "swelling bubble of hurt and shame" (269) for not making an extra effort of saving his companions.

Despite Krakauer's rendering the characters of the three guides, Rob Hall, Scott Fischer and Anatoli Boukreev as super-humans and prodigious climbers, charismatic figures contributing to the myth of the ultimate mountaineer, they are also shown as merely human: occasionally drinking or taking drugs, seeking media attention and financial

---

<sup>65</sup> Taske, Hutchison, Kasischke, and Fischbeck were clients and Krakauer's teammates on the Adventure Consultants Everest Expedition.

<sup>66</sup> On both, the ascent and the descent the expedition members and the guides were spread on the mountain, each moving in his/her tempo. The guides were supposed to supervise the climb and to help the clients, should the need arise. On the descent, Mike Groom and Jon Krakauer were moving together when they met Andy Harris, but they did not stay together. Krakauer was one of the first clients to reach the summit and to start going down, and when he met Harris he supposed the guide was waiting for the slower clients.

gain, or lacking social competence at times. In his account, Krakauer establishes the dichotomy of an ultimate climber, a super-human, and a very ordinary person in one individual.

### **Susceptibility to Superstitions**

Mountaineering as a life style bears in itself dangers mostly nonexistent in more 'down-to-earth' activities, due to its exposure to the elements a human being cannot control. Even though a rational mind will agree that from a scientific point of view no divine interference is to be expected, the irrational soul strives to secure the mercy and support of supernatural powers. Thus mountaineers display a considerable amount of superstition when climbing, which may not be the case in their lives outside climbing. Krakauer, for example, describes instances, also reflected in *The Ascent*, where the expedition members feel relieved and reassured to receive a blessing from a holy man before a difficult climb. It has become a common practice of Westerners adopted from the local people to leave prayer flags on the top of a mountain in order to mollify the gods, or to wear a red string obtained during the blessing. The same facet is rendered in *High Adventure*: Edmund Hillary experiences a strong desire to burn some butter on a stone to offer thanks for the divine help on a rather dangerous climb.

Another very important aspect of the supernatural in mountaineering is one's 'inner voice.' There are a number of occasions described by experienced mountaineers when thanks to the interference of an unknown force or of the 'inner voice' a disaster has been avoided. Krakauer summarizes this inclination in the following way:

Crusty old alpinists who've survived a lifetime of close scrapes like to counsel young protégés that staying alive hinges on listening carefully to one's "inner voice." Tales abound of one or another climber who decided to remain in his or her sleeping bag after detecting some inauspicious vibe in the ether and thereby survived a catastrophe that wiped out others who failed to heed the portents. (77)

To ensure godly assistance and protection, the climbers on Rob Hall's expedition are planning to perform *pūja*. They are eager to receive some extra securities for the climb but have to abandon the plan as a monk fails to reach Base Camp. The climbers feel ill at ease and somewhat apprehensive because of this misfortune and are grateful for the Sherpas' assurance that their intention alone will give them the needed protection, as it is not the climbers' fault that the *pūja* has not taken place.

Rob Hall shows signs of superstition himself and is trying to secure luck by choosing May 10 as the summit day. He has previously reached the top of Everest on

May 10 and believes it will stay his lucky date. The choice of the date has also more pragmatic reasons, like the good weather forecast for the dates around May 10, but superstition still plays a considerable part.

### **Climbing Philosophy**

In his account, Krakauer talks about philosophical issues of climbing such as achievement, independence, personal responsibility, the feeling of belonging, mountaineering values. For example, Krakauer, a fair climber himself, considers self-sufficiency and partner reliance one of the most important aspects of climbing. At the same time he propagates the philosophy of the guides' responsibility for all aspects of the expedition, including the formation of a good team of clients and client security at any stage:

But trust in one's partners is a luxury denied those who sign on as clients on a guided ascent; one must put one's faith in the guide instead. As the helicopter droned toward Lukla, I suspected that each of my teammates hoped as fervently as I that Hall had been careful to weed out clients of dubious ability, and would have the means to protect each of us from one another's shortcomings. (38)

Krakauer readily adopts Hall's view that as the majority of clients on a commercial expedition lack the experience to make independent decisions, such decisions have to be taken by the guides only:

During my thirty-four-year tenure as a climber, I'd found that the most rewarding aspects of mountaineering derive from the sport's emphasis on self-reliance, on making critical decisions and dealing with the consequences, on personal responsibility. When you sign on as a client, I discovered, you are forced to give up all of that, and more. For safety's sake, a responsible guide will always insist on calling the shots – he or she simply can't afford to let each client make important decisions independently. (167-168)

Unfortunately, this very approach contributes to the disaster of 1996: the guides get disconnected<sup>67</sup> from the team and leave their charges unprepared, which leads to a number of deaths. Although Krakauer has witnessed the disadvantages of the 'guided mentality' within his team, he still criticizes Mountain Madness and the head guide, Anatoli Boukreev, for a contrary attitude, according to which clients have to be able to act independently and must be used to making important decisions by themselves. Krakauer himself admits that he was quite dissatisfied with the passive role the clients were assigned in his team but accepts it as an attribute of a commercial expedition.

---

<sup>67</sup> It is usual that the climbers spread along the route and choose the most suitable tempo. The guides are dispersed within this group, one being in front of the team, one in the middle and one at the end. That means that there are times when clients/guides climb alone for a stretch of time. There are many climbers who turn around without reaching the summit. If the terrain allows they can descend on their own. In this particular case Hall was at the end of the 'line' helping a weaker climber. Mike Groom was in the middle of the group, Andy Harris climbed at the front of the line. But the constellations changed in the course of the climb.

Continuing the discussion of a leader's responsibilities, Krakauer engages in a debate about the mountaineering and guiding ethics in terms of climbing with or without oxygen. Although Krakauer seems to admire this ability in a hypothetical mountaineer, he presents Boukreev<sup>68</sup> as the villain of Everest '96 and strongly criticises Boukreev for climbing without oxygen, arguing that it is irresponsible to guide without gas.<sup>69</sup> This lies at the basis of the so-called Krakauer-Boukreev controversy.<sup>70</sup>

The experiences on Everest bring about dramatic physical changes in the climbers but even more so psychological ones, influencing especially those who try to measure their strengths with the mountain for the first time. Most climbers say that they have never been the same after coming down from Everest because of the mountain's spiritual impact on the mountaineers. Here everything is in the extreme: the landscape, dangers and fears, bodily and mental sufferings, loss. These circumstances prompt Krakauer to begin a discussion of the aspect widely presented in mountaineering fiction and non-fiction, namely, the reassessment of ethical norms of what is acceptable and what not on the edge of the world. Among other things he quotes a Japanese climber saying that "[a]bove 8,000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality" (241) as an explanation to why he and his teammates did not help two climbers close to death. On the one hand, Krakauer is shocked by such a disregard of human life. On the other hand, the principle 'save who can be saved' is also applied by the members of his team: when Weathers and Namba are found after the storm, they are still breathing. Yet it is decided against bringing them down to Base Camp as they are considered to be beyond the possibility of being saved, and the attempt to bring them down will unnecessarily jeopardize other climbers. At the same time, Krakauer expresses his gratitude to the IMAX team, the members of which were very selfless to share their oxygen with the distressed climbers and to bring severely injured Beck down. The IMAX team abandoned their plans and assisted those in need disregarding costs and a chance that later on they would lack the supplies they had given to the Adventure Consultants climbers.

---

<sup>68</sup> Anatoly Boukreev climbed numerous mountains above 8,000 m, including Everest without the help of supplemental oxygen. He explained it with the lack of necessity rather than by any idealistic views.

<sup>69</sup> The atmospheric pressure on the upper reaches of Mount Everest is about a third of sea level pressure, meaning there is about only a third of oxygen available to breathe at sea level. A lack of oxygen leads to quick exhaustion, higher risk of frostbite, disorientation and irrationality. Krakauer argued that because of a lack of oxygen Boukreev was feeling cold and was afraid of possible frostbites, thus he left his clients to descend as soon as possible.

<sup>70</sup> Boukreev got the permission of Scott Fischer to climb without oxygen, agreeing that in case of a sudden 'loss' of gas a climber finds him/herself stranded within a few minutes.

Everest becomes a source of initiation for the climbers. Apart from making great efforts to overcome the after-effects of altitude and exposure, the climbers are additionally confronted with human mortality, with the thought that the climbers themselves are very transient and expendable, so insignificant against the vastness and eternity of Everest. Yet the human mind is very adaptable and the second time Krakauer sees a corpse, he, as well as his climbing companions, accept it as an unlucky inevitability on the mountain. He prefers to put it out of his mind as soon as he can, closing his eyes and mind to the gruesomeness of the scene. The experience of the mountain hardens the climbers and, in Blakean terms, leads to the loss of innocence, and to the realization of the climbers' vulnerability and mortality:

The first body had left me badly shaken for several hours; the shock of encountering the second wore off almost immediately. Few of the climbers trudging by had given either corpse more than a passing glance. It was as if there were an unspoken agreement on the mountain to pretend that these desiccated remains weren't real – as if none of us dared to acknowledge what was at stake here. (107)

The experiences on Everest make Krakauer see death as an immediate reality rather than only “a conveniently hypothetical concept” (271) and feel its meaning for the first time. The losses make the author question the meaning of the climb and his ready acceptance of risks and mortality in mountaineering as well as the price of the climb. By using the past tense to describe his beliefs before the expedition Krakauer distances himself from them:

I'd always known that climbing mountains was a high-risk pursuit. I accepted that danger was an essential component of the game – without it, climbing would be little different from a hundred other trifling diversions. It was titillating to brush up against the enigma of mortality, to steal a glimpse across its forbidden frontier. Climbing was a magnificent activity, I firmly believed, not in spite of the inherent perils, but precisely because of them. (270)

Krakauer admits that he did not truly appreciate the gravity of the risks he and the others faced (275) and questions the concepts of safe climbing in big mountains he used to have when joining Rob Hall's expedition. He is a changed person after being in the centre of the disaster and he is trying to make sense of what has happened and to understand his role in the Everest tragedy.

Very similar to Abe Burns and Daniel Corder in *The Ascent*, the participants of both Rob Hall and Scott Fischer's expeditions, are marked by the disappearance of comrades, by the same tragedy. They all respond to the dramatic experience in different ways. Unlike the author, one of his team-mates, Klev Schoening, has come to terms



with his experience on Everest and feels no survival guilt because he has given everything there was to give on the mountain in his attempt to save his fellow-climbers. One of Scott Fischer's guides, Neal Beidleman, is haunted by the memory of Yasuko Namba, the Japanese woman from Hall's team, feeling her fingers sliding across his biceps, and then letting go (see 288). But one of the things Krakauer and his climbing companions have acquired through their attempt to climb Everest is a clearer perspective of life and a careful optimism of the things working out in the future.

### **Spiritual Corruption**

Climbing and mountains have always been associated with romantic notions of purity, idealism, altruism, achievement, responsibility, camaraderie, etc. There are no laws or rules of correct behaviour in the mountains but whenever these values are abandoned, especially for the sake of material benefits, one speaks about spiritual corruption. In the absolute sense of it any commercial expedition fits the description.

It is a popular belief in the mountaineering community that spiritual corruption is in some way punished by the higher powers. After the dramatic events of Everest '96 many of the climbers directly involved in the tragedy were trying to make sense of what happened and were inclined to look for the reasons in their own actions.

*Into Thin Air* deals with commercial expeditions to Everest, where climbing is used for generating profit, which is a controversial enterprise and somewhat looked down upon as it is incompatible with the idea of freedom the mountains have been associated with and stains the traditional idealistic purity of mountaineering with consumerism and commercialism. Commercial expeditions are decried as activities bringing onto the mountains people who lack a certain reverence toward the mountains as well as mountaineering ethics since they have not gone through the mountaineering school of life. It is believed that the clients collect the summits for souvenirs, Everest being the jewel.

It can be assumed that both Scott Fischer's and Rob Hall's drive to reach the summit of Everest overrode intrinsic rewards in their attempt to secure their businesses. It is difficult to speculate whether the matters could have developed differently on Everest in 1996 but considerable outside pressure undoubtedly played a crucial role in the tragedy. Krakauer relates Fischer's yearning for success for his Mountain Madness expedition in the following way: "[d]uring the 1980s Fischer made a number of

impressive ascents that earned him a modicum of local renown, but celebrity in the world climbing community eluded him. Despite his concerted efforts, he was unable to land a lucrative commercial sponsorship of the sort enjoyed by some of his more famous peers” (64).

At the time Fischer went on the 1996 expedition, he was being given considerable media attention and went out of his way to maintain his reputation. For Fischer the financial aspects were less important than recognition and respect but money was crucial for achieving recognition. This and the pressure to perform best, felt by both Fischer and Hall due to abundant media attention, became essential factors in the 1996 Everest climb and the causes of the consecutive tragedy. It is believed that these aspects drove both leading guides and some clients to go further than they had wanted to go. Materialistic motives are often interpreted as conflicting with purist vision of mountaineering. This point of view is confirmed by the fact that the theme is widely reflected in fiction. For example, a similar instance is described in *Solo Faces* where Bray pushed himself further than he would have done while climbing for his pleasure and perished on the Eiger partially due to outside pressure, mostly created by the media.

Like *The Ascent*, *Into Thin Air* raises the question of responses to the deaths of teammates on big mountains. What is the right thing to do if a partner dies on a climb which would be very difficult to attempt again: do you abandon the climb out of respect to the dead or do you continue to the summit as a way to honour the dead?

Krakauer writes that “most of us were simply wrapped too tightly in the grip of summit fever to engage in thoughtful reflection about the death of someone in our midst” (156). The author admits that he, like his climbing companions, thought he would contemplate on the meaning of death after he had climbed the mountain and reached the safety of Base Camp. The climbers are unwilling to confront their mortality and are confident they will have time to think about important things after the climb. Some never get this opportunity as they die on Everest.

Everest takes a heavy toll of the mountaineers and the experience leaves Krakauer and his team-mates “physically and emotionally wrecked” (245) and shattered to debilitation, with his “mind balked and retreated into a weird, almost robotic state of detachment” (245). It is difficult to say what has suffered a heavier blow, the climbers’ body or psyche. In any case, the physical condition of Krakauer’s team-mates is nothing but disastrous:

Searching out the rest of our crew, I found Frank Fischbeck and Lou Kasischke lying in a nearby tent. Lou was delirious and snow-blind, completely without sight, unable to do anything for himself, muttering incoherently. Frank looked as if he were in a severe state of shock, but he was doing his best to take care of Lou. John Taske was in another tent with Mike Groom; both men appeared to be asleep or unconscious. As rickety as I felt, it was obvious that everyone else except Stuart Hutchion was faring even worse. (246)

Mike Groom, the only surviving guide of the Adventure Consultants expedition, is “seriously frostbitten, lying insensate in his tent, at least for the time being he was unable even to speak” (247). The other team’s condition is not much different. When the Mountain Madness team descended to Camp Three, David Breashears, the leader of the IMAX Everest expedition, recalled: ““I was astounded. They looked like they’d been through a five-month war”” (249). Beck Weathers, Krakauer’s team-mate, is in the worst condition. When Krakauer finds Beck left alone in a tent, the author is shocked by Beck’s condition: “his face hideously swollen; splotches of deep, ink-black frostbite covered his nose and cheeks” (255) with hands swollen to deformity, yelling for help for several hours. At this moment Krakauer is overcome with the feeling of guilt for abandoning a companion,<sup>71</sup> for readily accepting the judgement that he is past saving and has to be left to die. Such lack of attention to one’s next and such a reluctance to take personal responsibility for the happenings contradict the ethical codes of mountaineering and appear to be the reason for the malice of the mountain.

On the descent to Camp Three a Sherpa is hit by a falling rock on the head, with a sickening sound, chipping “a divot as large as a silver dollar from the Sherpa’s skull”. At this point the climbers feel that they are being punished for something by the mountain. They are totally perplexed with the only question in their heads: ““What’s going on here? What have we done to make this mountain so angry?”” (250). One of the possible answers is that the climbers are punished for their irreverence towards the mountain, for a lack of attention to one another, and for abdicating responsibility for the weaker, unacceptable in the mountains.

---

<sup>71</sup> Beck Weathers was left to die on the South Col when Boukreev found the stranded climbers (Charlotte Fox, Sandy Pittman and Tim Madson) huddled together, Yasuko Namba presumed dead, Weathers nowhere to be seen. In the morning after the storm, Stuart Hutchison, a cardiologist and Beck’s teammate, found both Weathers and Namba still breathing but in coma and declared them being beyond saving. Several hours later, Beck miraculously awoke from the coma and walked to Camp IV on his own. He was then covered with sleeping-bags and left in a tent, as he still was not expected to survive. At some point a blast of wind uncovered the badly frostbitten climber, whose hands were useless. That was when Krakauer found Beck in the tent screaming for help. Thus, Weathers had been left alone and unattended twice, and Krakauer felt bad for not caring more about his teammates and for counting on someone else to do it.

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

In his several books and numerous articles, Jon Krakauer touches upon the issue of climbing and he muses about the general and personal meaning of the climb and speaks of mountaineering as the activity that gives sense to his life: “[t]he incumbent hazards lent the activity a seriousness of purpose that was sorely missing from the rest of my life. I thrilled in the fresh perspective that came from tipping the ordinary plane of existence on end” (20).

An additional aspect essential to the desire to climb is the sense of belonging. It can be either belonging to the climbing community, or belonging to a specific group of people, or belonging to a very tight circle of the ultimate mountaineers, as in the case of Scott Fischer. The importance of this issue is seen from the frequency it appears in mountaineering literature, both fiction and non-fiction. This aspect is also addressed in *Solo Faces*, *The Ascent*, and *Beyond the Mountain* as a very meaningful part of the drive to climb: “[...]climbing provided a sense of community as well. To become a climber was to join a self-contained, rabidly idealistic society, largely unnoticed and surprisingly uncorrupted by the world at large” (20).

Speaking about climbing Everest, Krakauer, like so many before him, answers the question “Why climb Everest?” in a line with the most famous reply to the question “Because it is there!”. There is no rational justification of this desire, only a hope for intrinsic rewards: “[...]attempting to climb Everest is an intrinsically irrational act – a triumph of desire over sensibility. Any person who would seriously consider it is almost by definition beyond the sway of reasoned argument” (xiii).

On several occasions Krakauer touches upon a rather common aspect of mountaineering, namely addiction to it. The author realizes he belongs to the climbing addicts after his failed resolution to quit climbing and “get serious about life” (83), and confirms his hobby as the centre and the sense of his life. As Krakauer puts it, “I’d failed to appreciate the grip climbing had on my soul, however, or the purpose it lent to my otherwise rudderless life. I didn’t appreciate the void that would loom in its absence” (83). Such an attitude to climbing as a priority causes marital problems. It is important to note that Krakauer’s wife, Linda, used to be an exceptionally gifted climber herself but quit after a serious injury. Yet even her insight into the scene does not contribute to her understanding of Krakauer’s obsession.

The author acknowledges the fact that although he used to regard Everest with slight contempt for the alleged lack of technical challenges, he was desperate to try and climb it and to experience “the grip of the Everest mystique” (84). This grip of Everest, the totally irrational desire to reach the summit of Everest, even if risks exceed any positive outcome, has been mentioned by numerous climbers apart from the author, including Tenzing Norgay, George Leigh Mallory, Sir Edmund Hillary, Chris Bonington, Reinhold Messner, etc. One of the clients on the Adventure Consultants expedition, Doug Hansen, feels the grip of Everest on his soul and, like Daniel in *The Ascent*, is going to do everything to reach the top. He explains his motive to Krakauer, saying “I’ve put too much of myself into this mountain to quit now, without giving it everything I’ve got” (148). In the end, Doug will pay the highest price for his obsession.

Krakauer enquires into the reasons to climb Everest and names a number of less virtuous ones such as becoming a “minor celebrity, career advancement, ego massage, ordinary bragging rights, filthy lucre,” some of which certainly are his as well, but the author comes to the conclusion that for him to climb Everest has an additional meaning – it is a search for enlightenment. He admits: “I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain. And in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace” (136).

This feeling resembles the desire of the protagonist of *Solo Faces*, Vernon Rand, who longed to find enlightenment through his climbing, something he had seen in another climber’s face some fifteen years before. Krakauer searches for other motivations for climbing in the conversations with his climbing companions and he sees that many of them express the ideas also found in *The Ascent*, *The Climb*, *Beyond that Mountain*. Thus for some climbing becomes the wellspring of the feeling of belonging. For example, John Taske confides to the author that for him climbing has become the source of things he was lacking in his life after retiring from the army, “the challenge, the camaraderie, the sense of mission” (137). For many others climbing becomes a way to gain a perspective on their life problems, a response to the calamities of life, or a metaphoric search for their place in the universe.

### ***The Climb*. Anatoli Boukreev and G. Weston DeWalt**

#### **The Book**

*The Climb* was written by the head guide of the Mountain Madness expedition, Anatoli Boukreev, with the assistance of G. Weston DeWalt. It deals with the same events described in Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and is the response to the criticism of Boukreev's actions voiced extensively in Krakauer's account. *The Climb* is less sophisticated in its descriptive power and stylistic devices yet it attempts to provide facts rather than interpretations and speculations, and does not claim to have the answers to the questions posed by the events on Everest in 1996. Numerous reviews regard *The Climb* as lacking Krakauer's literary subtlety yet as more genuine and trustworthy writing. For example, Galen Rowell's review in *The American Alpine Journal* describes the differences between *The Climb* and *Into Thin Air* in the following way:

Even with DeWalt's impassionate prose and editing of Boukreev's transcribed interviews, *The Climb* fails to sustain the superb narrative quality that brought *Into Thin Air* to the pinnacle of literary success atop the *New York Times* bestseller list. But while it lacks the carefully choreographed structure and characterizations that make *Into Thin Air* impossible to put down, it forces the reader to think, rather than to accept armchair answers passively.<sup>72</sup>

Besides, unlike Krakauer, Boukreev shows no feeling of guilt in his account. The book is filled with remorse and mourning for the lost lives but Boukreev's conscience is clear: he did everything he possibly could to save the stranded climbers.

Although Anatoli Boukreev is a Russian from Kazakhstan, it is legitimate to include *The Climb* in this paper, dealing predominantly with British and North American writings because Boukreev was part of an American expedition, the book is written in English and is co-authored by an American. *The Climb* appeared as a result of unification of Boukreev's expedition logs, personal journals, letters and oral history. Boukreev's account has a double purpose: for him it is the attempt to recount the events from his point of view; for DeWalt, it presents an opportunity to ask his own questions ranging beyond Boukreev's experiences. *The Climb* was written in 1997 with later amendments included in the 1999 edition after Anatoli Boukreev had been killed in an avalanche on Annapurna in December 1997.

Event descriptions come from Boukreev but the portrayal of Boukreev himself is done by DeWalt, who skilfully recreates the image of the ultimate climber, one of the

---

<sup>72</sup> Galen Rowell's review of *The Climb* in *The American Alpine Journal*, reproduced in *The Climb* (301-302).

strongest in the world in his lifetime. DeWalt presents an introverted, reserved person, comfortable only in the rough and primordial environment of high mountains. In *The Climb*, Boukreev seems to be marked by the loss in May 1996 and appears haunted and weathered: “[h]is eyes were sunken, tired. The tip of his nose and places on his lips were crusted in black, the telltale dead skin that comes with severe frostbite. He was distant; he looked as if he’d moved out of his body and into a place that had no address” (xvi).

### **The Landscape of Climbing**

The account opens with the contextualization of Everest: the highest mountain of the world made into a cash cow, the point also discussed in *Into Thin Air*. But there are relatively few descriptions of camps or landscapes and even fewer passages presenting difficulties and dangers of climbing on Everest as graphically as in Krakauer's account. The information provided is strictly matter-of-fact, supplying an objective image of obstacles and problems encountered. For Boukreev the mountains are a temple and god in one<sup>73</sup> but he does not find it necessary to devote much narrative space to his vision of the mountains. Yet the book does give vivid impressions of some of the most dangerous places, like the Khumbu Icefall, though more level-headed and more resembling a popular explanation of a phenomenon than those of Krakauer's:

Moving through the course you hear creaks, splinters, and moans, because the landscape, just as it is at Base Camp, is always on the move. Your prayer is that none of the sounds is announcing a catastrophic shift, one that could cause a crevasse to suddenly gape under a spanning ladder or to topple a crystalline bank building onto the rope. (67)

In Boukreev's understanding mountains are devoid of malign power attributed to them in *Into Thin Air*, *Solo Faces* or *The Ascent*; mountains are impartial but possess certain qualities that make human existence hardly possible under certain conditions. Thus, to be on the slopes of Everest, Boukreev believes, is a privilege which can be withdrawn at any moment. In this respect, he makes a point also voiced in other mountaineering writings that mountains can magnify climbers' actions, especially at high altitudes "where any mistake is amplified in the rarefied air, where a swallow of hot tea from a thermos is the difference between life and death" (80).

Although *The Climb* features very few figurative descriptions, several of them give a rather picturesque idea of what it is like to be in 'the Death Zone', and repeat the view that the upper reaches of Everest are a hostile place, unfit for human existence. In one instance, for example, it is mentioned that "[l]ingering above Camp VI has all the pleasurable possibilities of picnicking in a mine-field" (136), on another occasion a series of rock steps is described as "better suited for mythical, claw-footed creatures than mortals" (137). This point is further emphasised by the impressions of the climbers recollecting what it is like to be exposed to the elements on Mount Everest. Lou Kasischke, Rob Hall's client, describes his condition in Camp VI after turning his back

---

<sup>73</sup> See the quotation below in The Meaning of Climbing.



on the mountain: debilitated from exhaustion, snow-blind and scared, lying alone in a tent he was listening to the wind howl “like a hundred freight trains running on top of you” (169). The power and dimensions are flabbergasting. The mountain has just started revealing its malice but already that is more than enough to kill a human being in an instant:

I just collapsed in my sleeping bag from exhaustion. ... I don’t think I had a molecule of energy left in me. Later [I] awoke or regained consciousness ... and it was a terrifying experience for me. Actually, it was the wind that woke me up. It was just pushing me around inside of my tent. It was actually getting under the floor of the tent, picking me right up in my sleeping bag and slamming me back down and pushing me around, and I regained consciousness and I couldn’t see! ... It was probably the worst moment of my life. (168-169)

The same storm hits the climbers still on the mountain. The wind is blowing with such force that the climbers are repeatedly thrown to the ground and “all communication was by screaming, and usually only downwind” (173). Soon the extreme cold and the blasts of wind rob the climbers of their last strengths and the white-out deprives them of orientation. The climbers’ only hope for survival is to be found, as they huddle in a big dogpile only 400 meters away from the camp, hopelessly lost in the total whiteout. For some of them help comes too late.

### The Sublime

As has been mentioned above, *The Climb* rarely features landscape descriptions and even more rarely those done in a lyrical key or betraying a sense of admiration. The closest to the feeling of the sublime is related in connection to the view of Everest:

The Western Cwm<sup>74</sup> is a glacial hollow, an undulating sweep of snow and ice about four kilometers long that tilts gradually upward and is enclosed on three sides by the peaks and connecting ridges of Mount Everest, Lhotse, and Nuptse, the major peaks of the Mount Everest Massif. It offers from its vantage a view that is obstructed in Base Camp: the looming, magnificent, and daunting summit of Mount Everest. (71-72)

A much better revelation of the feeling of the sublime is the description of Lene Gammelgaard’s reaction, who at the sight of the majestic mountain “stood apart from the other climbers and silently wept” (72). Occasionally Boukreev mentions the spiritual impact the mountains have on him, writing that “[t]he eternity and power of the mountains penetrate[s] me” (80).

---

<sup>74</sup> Cwm, pronounced ‘coom’ is a Welsh word for a bowl shaped valley.

Boukreev's manner of presenting mountains is very reserved and mostly limited to the analysis of technical difficulties to be expected on a specific route, or to the explanation of what can be expected from one part of the landscape or another. Due to the author's very reticent nature there are very few superlatives in the descriptions of the mountains. Yet on those rare occasions when Boukreev does write about the *meaning* of climbing and of the mountains, he unveils his admiration, reverence, and deep awe for the grandeur of the mountains and speaks of the insignificance of human existence against such a sublime background: "[e]mbraced by bony ribs of mountains jutting into the sky. Their jagged summits precisely articulated in the crystal air. You humbly apprehend in this majesty your smallness in the scheme of things" (237).

## **The Presentation of Character**

### **The Author and Other Climbers**

The characters in *The Climb* are portrayed in several ways: DeWalt adopts a somewhat omniscient stance in the account but he abstains from too many evaluative characterizations and lets either Boukreev or other climbers speak, thus enabling an indirect presentation.

Boukreev is the ultimate mountaineer in the eyes of his peers, but he avoids talking about himself too much. The central place in *The Climb* is given to Boukreev's vision of the tragic events of the 1996 season on Everest. Although the book focuses on Boukreev's visions and interpretations, it yields relatively few descriptions of the main figure but rather depicts the reality and other characters matter-of-factly. Even Boukreev's characterization as "legendary for his endurance and the speed of his high-altitude ascents" (13) included in the book is no exaggeration but a mere statement of the fact which prompted Fischer to engage Boukreev as a lead guide: for his competence, speed, endurance and readiness to give more than Fischer believes an American climber would do. Yet Boukreev admits that he is by far not the easiest person to deal with and is reluctant to hold clients' hands. He sees his task in preparing the route and securing the safety of the team, and in the emergency case, in pulling the stranded ones off the mountain. It is difficult for him to accept that "equally if not more important was chatting and keeping the clients pleased by focusing on their personal happiness" (84). Boukreev's position is that climbers entertaining the ambition of climbing above 8,000 meters cannot possibly expect to be baby-sat.

Boukreev comes across as a very reserved but straightforward person judging others by their skills and experiences. With "the discipline of an Olympic athlete and the intense focus of a test pilot" (93), he is "seen by some as detached, by others as self-absorbed and aloof" (93). When Boukreev characterizes Mountain Madness clients he does it in a very objective and methodical way, accepting them at face value. What matters most is performance and experience by which the probability of success can be calculated. The same criterion Boukreev applies to himself.

The indirect character presentation through attitude and performance is a very telling device. Climbers' responses to the terrain and problems are indicative of their skills, physical condition and, most of all, of a mind-set. This becomes very evident in comparing, for example, Krakauer's description of his first days in Base Camp, full of

inconveniences and sufferings, and Boukreev's first days at the same altitude filled with work and the little pleasures of a simple life. Such portrayals make the difference between humans and 'super-humans' more prominent.

Boukreev's first days in Base Camp present a totally different picture as seen by a very strong person yet very simple in his needs. He is used to hard work and hard conditions and knows nothing better than his life at high altitude devoid of the superfluous things of civilization, and draws deep spiritual satisfaction from feeling his bond to the mountains:

That afternoon I threw myself into physical labor with the Sherpas and worked steadily with them every day until our clients arrived. I would rise around 8:00 A.M. when the sun would hit the tents, have some steaming-hot, milky black tea, and go immediately to work. Around 10:00 A.M. we would break and have breakfast, chapatis with eggs, oatmeal, or tsampa, a barley-flour porridge. Then, in the evenings, a large meal: rice, lentils, garlic soup, and whatever fresh vegetables had been brought in by porters in previous days. For many Westerners I think it would be considered a monotonous diet, but I had become accustomed to it in my years in the Himalaya, and I've always preferred it over the packaged and exotic foods that many expeditions bring onto the mountain. Heavy on carbohydrates and always with a lot of hot liquid, it is perfectly suited to the physical demands of high altitude.

Our work was strenuous at that altitude, but for me the work is part of my adjustment to altitude. Pushing the body, keeping it exercised and active at those elevations, is, I think, important and contributes to acclimatization. I enjoyed the measured, regular schedule and the rhythms of the work, and every evening the physical fatigue was so great that sleep came easily. (48-49)

Another distinction of Anatoly Boukreev from numerous other mountaineers is his lack of fear in the mountains. Yet what *The Climb* describes is not a dare-devil fanatical climber, throwing caution to the wind but a very careful, responsible and highly experienced climber who feels one with the mountains and a total misfit elsewhere: "I do not experience fear in the mountains. On the contrary ... I feel my shoulders straightening, squaring, like the birds as they straighten their wings. I enjoy the freedom and the altitude. It is only when I return to life below that I feel the world's weight on my shoulders" (256).

Not only does Boukreev perceive the mountaineering routine in a way totally different from that of the Mountain Madness clients, but he also has a different understanding of climbing goals and advocates the approach in which "a collective effort and teamwork were always emphasized and personal ambitions had a second-level place" (57). That is why equally strange to him are the things widely practiced by Mountain Madness and the like: "the electronic fussiness, the publicity-mongering, the

pampering and politics” (75), the things so distant from Boukreev’s idea of being in the mountains. The media madness becomes especially aggravating to Boukreev in the aftermath of the tragedy. He cannot understand “this fascination with wrecks, wars, disasters, and catastrophes” (208).

Boukreev tries to cope with the tragic happenings and the losses. At the same time, painful experiences open new possibilities of understanding and appreciating the world. He writes: “[f]or all of us it was as if the world were now painted in more vivid colors, and we were feeling life’s simple pleasures with more clarity and meaning. For those of us who had been fortunate enough to come back alive, we were enjoying the moments of discovering life all over again” (208).

To regain his inner calmness Boukreev makes a solo ascent of Lhotse the day after the Everest expedition. Going back to the mountains and being there alone is Anatoly’s response to the tragedy and to life in general. Shortly after the events in 1996 Boukreev says: “I was prepared to turn my face to the mountains. I felt unsuited for life anywhere else. [...] It is a lonely and a strange life, inexplicable to some, but for me it is my home; it is my work” (230). Yet the ghosts of the past are haunting him and Boukreev feels a great need to return to the slopes of Mount Everest and to bury Scott Fischer and Yasuko Namba in order to find a closure of the tragedy. Boukreev is tormented by remorse over his inability to save the stranded climbers who were so close and yet died.

Boukreev cannot understand the readiness of some clients to sacrifice their life for an ambition but he sometimes becomes a tool of achieving such goals, a role he deeply regrets, and it is only with great reservations that he plays this part. Anatoly realizes that his activity as a guide will only promote amateur climbing in high mountains but that is the only thing he can do for a living. Yet Boukreev makes a distinct difference between a guide and a consultant, maintaining that he can only advise but not take charge or play the all-mighty, guaranteeing success to the inexperienced clients:

It is harsh for me to say I will not be called a *guide*, to make a distinction that will absolve me of that terrible choice between another person’s ambition and his or her life. Each person must bear the responsibility to risk his or her life. This distinction between *guide* and *consultant* is one I am sure will be mocked by some, yet it is the only protest I can make about the guarantee of success in these mountains. I can be a coach, an adviser, I will act as a rescue agent. I cannot guarantee success or safety for anyone from the crushing complexity of natural circumstances and physical debility that haunts you at high altitude. I accept that I may die in the mountains. (250)

Boukreev was killed in an avalanche on Annapurna in December 1997.

The presentations of Rob Hall and Scott Fischer parallel those seen in *Into Thin Air*: the ultimate mountaineers with their lives centred on climbing. Scott Fischer is “a charismatic personality with the drawing power of an industrial magnet” (7) and runs his Mountain Madness company “as an extension of his personal ambition: to climb mountains around the world and to have the hell of a time doing it” (7) but his “swashbuckling, devil-may-care” (8) attitude appears as a drawback in ‘big mountains – big money’ business. Everest for Scott Fischer is not only a personal ambition but was also a very financially lucrative enterprise.

“More of a romantic than a businessman” (208), Scott finds his death on the slopes of Mount Everest and is ‘buried’ by Boukreev in the best way the circumstances allow: covered with his backpack and empty oxygen canisters.

### **Susceptibility to Superstitions**

Anatoli Boukreev appears through the account to be a very sensible person devoid of superstitions but rather perceptive towards his inner voice, which, one can suppose, is based on his profound mountaineering experience. Boukreev listens to his intuition warning him against making the final push to the top of Everest immediately after a storm. He cannot get rid of a feeling that something is not right. Even the perspective of climbing Everest seems to have lost its appeal: “[a]head, I figured, was the summit assault, and I didn’t have any wish to do it. For some reason my internal voice was quiet, and I didn’t have the usual pre-assault high when every muscle is ready and poised for the first command” (128).

To Boukreev, a sudden break in the ferocious wind is very suspicious and resembles a lure of the mountain, “as if the mountain was beckoning with a finger and speaking softly, ‘Come on. Come on’” (129).

The lure of the mountain is also described from the point of view of other climbers. Lou Kasischke, Rob Hall’s client, is initially so absorbed by his desire of summiting Mount Everest that he is prepared to disregard his frostbitten fingers. He also disregards his inner voice expressing serious doubt of his ability to get down in one piece. But he “just didn’t care because summiting Everest was so important to me, that I was just going to go no matter what” (140). Kasischke’s drive feeds on the “breathtaking views” and “the most spectacular sights” (149) he has ever seen, but as

soon as the views are gone and he is told there are another two hours to the top, it is as though he wakes up from the slumber and breaks the spell of the mountain. Retrospectively, Kasischke cannot stop wondering at his ability to turn his back on Everest but considers it to be one of the wisest decisions he has ever taken. In this way, a superstition about a mountain trying to lure climbers and lull them into a false sense of security is repeated and a cliché about the importance of listening to one's inner voice, popular in mountaineering circles, is confirmed.

### **Climbing Philosophy**

Beside rendering Boukreev's vision of the tragic events on Mount Everest in 1996 *The Climb* offers an insight into the author's philosophic views on climbing. They include the disapproval of the commercialisation of the mountains and the regret over the values lost through this process. For example, Boukreev dislikes the so-called legalistic approach, practiced, among others, by Rob Hall, because, in author's opinion, "an industry that promotes the values of personal freedom and initiative would expound a philosophy that minimizes the pursuit of these very values" (135).

Although Boukreev himself plays a significant role in the commercialisation of the high mountains, he is worried that it is wrong. He decries the tendency of leading amateur climbers to the summit and back by the hand and propagates self-reliance and responsibility for one's actions and failures. Boukreev believes that "at the end we are each responsible for our ambitions" (232), and it is extremely difficult for him to comprehend the commitment to the objective of ascending Everest even at the cost of one's life. Yet he is prepared to risk his life rescuing other climbers. He summarises his philosophy on this issue in the following way: "I come from a tradition that promotes mountaineering as a reasonable sports endeavor, not as a game of Russian roulette; the death of a team member is always a failure that supersedes any summit success" (232). For him mountaineering is a way of life and not a competition or collecting of trophies.

### **Spiritual Corruption**

Like Krakauer, Boukreev makes commercialisation of mountaineering partially responsible for the Everest disaster of 1996. Equally, the evidence presented in both *Into Thin Air* and *The Climb* implies that the main reason of Scott Fischer's death on Everest is his business ambition which intervenes with his mountaineering desires and procedures. Fischer's financial enterprise demanded more of his physical and mental strengths than he could spare while climbing safely on the high mountains. He, like Rob Hall, felt immense pressure to perform and tended to push farther than he could go. Scott's "business was pulling him one way, his love of the mountains in another" (18). Fischer tried to be less ambitious and to take fewer risks because he said he did not want to die in the mountains, but he tried to maintain the image of a hero people saw in him. That, combined with financial reasons, and his longing for media success, led to Scott's death on Everest, because in order to secure his company's position on the adventure



mountaineering market, Fischer was ready to take more risks while climbing than he normally would. He was extremely exhausted in the days before the final push, but kept climbing to the top to help as many clients as he could to reach the summit. As one of Mountain Madness clients let drop, “Scott desperately wanted to get people up the mountain for advertisement’s sake” (107). The stakes of some other climbers were not lower than those of Fischer’s or Hall’s. As Lou Kasischke, one of Hall’s clients, suggests, those were the high stakes responsible for some unnecessary deaths: “I wasn’t going to have newspapers writing stories about me. And media, fame and fortune, world records, and all that kind of stuff, which were kind of the stakes for ... some of the others in our expedition” (142).

Boukreev also questions the motives and motivations of the clients trying to ascend Mount Everest, implying that most clients are ready to invest money but are not so generous with their time and efforts they would better spend preparing for the climb. For Boukreev, Everest is somewhat of a jewel, one of the best, but the clients will never see its true beauty because they will have little to compare it with. Thus he doubts the value of such a climb but believes in the individual right to decide for or against the climb:

Of course, each one of us has an ambition to reach the summit, to overcome obstacles and to do something that many consider impossible. But maybe, I thought, the price of climbing Everest is now being calculated in a different way. More and more people, it seems, are willing to pay a cash price for the opportunity, but not a physical price for preparedness: the gradual development of body and spirit as you climb lower-level peaks, moving from the simple to the complex and finally to the 8,000ers. Isn’t there accomplishment to be felt in such a process, I wondered, or has high-altitude climbing forever been changed by the use of oxygen, advances in technologies, and the proliferation of services that allow the marginally prepared to climb higher and higher? (80-81)

But Boukreev stresses that in the case of emergency, no amount of money paid would guarantee success because the safety margin is extremely small and even the best guide cannot control everything. It is especially in such situations that the climbers have to resort to their own skills and experience.

Boukreev questions the value of Everest ascents instigated by the desire for publicity, recognition or financial profit because on many occasions he sees “the insignificance of personal, egotistical yearnings for records, compared to the greatness and eternity of the mountains themselves” (Boukreev, “Roads”). That is why he believes that “more significant than my results was the very process of connection with

the mountains. Man constantly needs trials and struggles, first of all with himself, not with the mountains” (Boukreev, “Roads”).

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

*Mountains are not Stadiums where I satisfy my ambition to achieve, they are the cathedrals where I practice my religion...I go to them as humans go to worship. From their lofty summits I view my past, dream of the future and, with an unusual acuity, am allowed to experience the present moment...my vision cleared, my strength renewed. In the mountains I celebrate creation. On each journey I am reborn.*

This is Boukreev's quotation carved on his memorial stone at the site of the Annapurna base-camp. It is the most exact characterization of his life philosophy, the main components of which are self-reliance and responsibility. Boukreev insisted on careful screening of the clients and deemed it imperative to choose only those "who can carry the responsibilities and challenges of high altitude" (21). Boukreev as a representative of the Eastern-European climbing school propagated the importance of being prepared for the mountains as opposed to the mountains being prepared for the clients: "Climbing at high altitude requires a different set of rules. You have to develop self-reliance in your climbers because you cannot hold their hands all the time. It is dangerous to say that Everest can be guided in the same sense that Mount McKinley can be guided" (21).

Climbing for Boukreev is a way to physical and spiritual development. The very process of climbing gives him the feeling of accomplishment; the summit of a mountain is only an additional reward. In author's opinion, mountaineering means for him a chance to deal with the mountains on their terms and by fair means. Mountains are also Boukreev's home, the only place he feels comfortable in. No matter what happens there, mountains are Boukreev's universe. He admits: "I love the mountains, it is here I am at home. [...] On that morning I knew as I always know, no matter what was before me, I was home, and this is the only life I am fit for" (236-237).

## **The Presentation of the Character of the Climber and Climbing Philosophy in Women's Climbing Literature**

### **Climbing Women**

Women have been climbing high mountains since at least 1808, when Marie Paradis became the first woman to ascend Mont Blanc. Yet the visage of female mountaineering has changed considerably over the last two centuries. In its early days it was customary for a woman to climb either with her male relative or at least with a long-term guide who was trusted like a family member. When travelling became easier due to the development of infrastructure, and mountaineering gained popularity, women became a more frequent sight in the mountains. At that time it was generally believed that steeper and technically challenging sections of routes were inadvisable for women, for who long but technically undemanding walks were deemed more appropriate until Mary Mummery, the wife of Albert Mummery,<sup>75</sup> voiced her objections to this assumption: "[...] strong prejudices are apt to be aroused the moment a woman attempts any more formidable sort of mountaineering. It appears to me, however, that her powers are, in actual fact, better suited to the really difficult climbs than to the monotonous snow grinds usually considered more fitting" (Mazel 60).

The relaxation of social norms regarding the role and image of women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the increase in the number of female climbers, and also contributed to the feeling of competitiveness between the genders. Yet such a sensitisation to gender issues in mountaineering was already present in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when in 1838 Mme d'Angeville insisted on climbing on her own (she was accompanied by guides but rejected the idea of climbing in the company of male relatives or acquaintances) and was always resolute to cover the entire way on foot.

Emily Hornby went a step further in asserting her independence while climbing: she abstained from engaging any long-time guides and quite often travelled alone. Mrs. E. P. Jackson<sup>76</sup> became the first climber to traverse the Jungfrau in winter.

It is interesting to note that social norms were relaxed regarding women mountaineers but conventions concerning women climbing clothes persisted for a

---

<sup>75</sup> Albert Frederick Mummery (1855-1895) was a prominent British mountaineer famous for his remarkable first ascents in the Alps; he was killed by an avalanche during the first attempt to climb Nanga Parbat.

<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, no further information is available about this early mountaineer.

longer time. In 1880s, the more courageous women climbed in trousers but they wore overskirts to hide the trousers from prying eyes and removed the overskirts only higher up in the mountains. Such a situation persisted into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw new developments in terms of mountaineering women: American women entered the mountaineering scene and took the sport to new heights. Thus her mountaineering exploits took Annie Smith Peck to South America, whereas Fanny Bullock Workman was among the first western women to climb in the Karakoram and the Himalayas. They, like many of their predecessors, were ardent advocates of feminist ideas and used climbing to prove that women are as good as men.

Despite numerous successful attempts of women to invade the male domain of mountaineering, the first all-woman ascent of a big mountain came only in 1970.<sup>77</sup> The all-woman ascent of Mt. Everest did not come until 1975, 22 years after the first ascent of the mountain.

Nowadays women are taking a very prominent part in writing mountaineering history and, consequently, mountaineering literature, which, in spite of a range of themes, forms and characters, does show certain common tendencies. The author of this thesis is trying not to trivialise women's climbing literature but the pieces of fiction randomly selected allow one a generalization that men and women approach the subject of climbing and of a figure of the climber in quite different ways. Whereas mountaineer characters constructed by male writers live in the present moment, are focused on nothing else but the summit or the climb and are strongly positioned, in the first place, as climbers, female writers tend to use mountaineering background and settings to examine the personality of a female protagonist, society-imposed roles, relationship issues and her place in the world as she sees it.

---

<sup>77</sup>Annapurna III (7 555m) was climbed by a Japanese all woman team.

### ***One Green Bottle*. Elizabeth Coxhead**

#### **The Novel**

Elizabeth Coxhead's (1909-1979) *One Green Bottle*<sup>78</sup> (1951) is considered to be a classical novel of British climbing, in the early days criticised for its depiction of pre-marital sex.

The events are told by a third person omniscient narrator, but the textual space devoted to Cathy's point of view dominates. The voice provides an insight into the minds and thoughts of all the characters. The narrator offers direct evaluative descriptions of the characters along with their indirect presentations.

*One Green Bottle* is a novel about climbing as much as it is about love, friendship and social norms. It is also a *bildungsroman*, where the protagonist goes through many transformations most of which are mental and spiritual. At the close of the novel the reader is presented with the protagonist at the same place where she was at the beginning: the slums of Birkenhead. Yet the change in Cathy Canning cannot be more striking: at the opening of the novel, she knows nothing but the dirt and misery of Tooley Street where she is forced to stay because of her family, poverty and ignorance. At the end, although she has bright prospects of marrying well and leaving the slums, she chooses to return to Tooley Street with the resolution of making a difference there by helping people who depend on her.

---

<sup>78</sup> *One Green Bottle* is included into Salked and Smith anthology *One Step in the Clouds*.

## **The Plot**

Cathy Canning, a young girl of 18, who lives in the slums of Birkenhead and is a factory hand, gets a new punch from life: Bill Powell, who is “not her boy” but has proposed to her, is sentenced to prison for two years. “Bill was gone, and Ma Powell all broken up, and her mother hated her, and the neighbours when they saw her fell silent, and there was no comfort anywhere” (369). Feeling thus alienated and depressed, Cathy accepts the advances of Leonard Head, a chance acquaintance, and agrees to go climbing with him in the Welsh hills. The travel is not only geographical but also mental: Cathy leaves her social milieu and tries an entertainment reserved until then for the middle- and upper class representatives.

Leonard is a disaster on the rock and their climb is a fiasco, but as the result of it Cathy meets Harry and Stan, the climbers who bring her to the youth hostel of Cae Capel, where the protagonist becomes instant friends with Dorothy, the warden of the hostel. Eventually Cathy is introduced to real climbing. New experiences, friends, and her weekends of climbing in Wales improve Cathy’s life immensely. Having tried the sport once, the protagonist grows more and more addicted to the mountains. Soon she becomes an accomplished climber loved and accepted in the climbing community of Cae Capel and famous beyond it.

One summer Dorothy’s fiancé, Michael Derwent, comes to spend a few weeks in Cae Capel. After several joint climbs Michael falls for Cathy but she remains loyal to her friend and rejects Michael’s advances. Shortly after the incident she falls in love with Christopher Thwaites, a teacher from the North of England. Yet, although Cathy is not committed to Bill Powell, the protagonist feels guilty because he is counting on her very much.

Cathy’s new relationship seems to be a nearly perfect one, and Chris pops the question several times, but gradually Cathy starts to suspect that although her new boyfriend loves her he also has feelings for somebody else. When she confronts Chris with her suspicions, he cannot deny them. At the same time the protagonist learns that Bill will be released from prison soon. Cathy’s life principle “[y]ou got to go where you’re needed most” (516) makes her decide to abandon climbing and to marry Bill, for whom she feels responsible, because “when folks get into terrible trouble they’ve a claim on you, whether you promised or not” (508).

### **The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime**

At 18 Cathy goes to the Welsh hills, where she experiences something she has not known before: she feels alive, full of energy, she belongs there. On the mountains, “she found herself floating down with an extraordinary sense of power and speed. Her feet, which had scarcely known any ground but pavements, were on this rough stuff gloriously at home” (374). As in many mountaineering texts, such a feeling of bliss in the mountains becomes the predominant sentiment in the novel. There are only few occasions when mountain glory turns into mountain gloom, for example, Cathy’s exultation gives way to growing dread at the sight of the wall Leonard suggests for the first climb, which is a “hillside frozen into stone” (377). The depiction of such instants only strengthens the feeling of the sublime Cathy experiences on the rocks, she is mesmerised by the idyll of the Welsh hills and lakes breathing warmth and tranquillity: “they climbed again to the long lake, so steely a week ago, and now it was blue and rippling and a man was fishing from a boat in the middle. On every side were great mountains; a peak with three startling rock heads dominated the scene” (387).

Like in *Solo Faces* and *Beyond The Mountain*, the mountains are associated with purity and the fullness of life, whereas towns and cities are described through images suggesting the ideas of boredom and ordinariness. In *One Green Bottle*, the charm of the mountains becomes even more prominent compared with the gloom of the slums in Cathy’s hometown. When the protagonist gets a chance to look around on one of her first routes in Wales, her soul seems to glow with excitement and fascination at: “the marvel of the rock scenery, grey ribs, noses and pinnacles supported on nothing and heeling over to the Holyhead Road two thousand feet below, fairly left one astounded. That such places could exist in the same world as Tooley Street was beyond belief” (392).

To Cathy climbing feels like flying, and she senses life pulsing in her veins. The weather does not seem to matter to her: whether in snow or in rain, the activity gives her feelings of freedom and achievement that she has not known in Birkenhead. Cathy is additionally overwhelmed by the feeling of sheer bliss at the sight of the sublime landscape: “[a] knife-edge which one rode on the seat of one’s breeches, then a stone policeman barring the way. The great opposite wall of the Amphitheatre had opened up, a screen of crag on which Johnny Hollinger and his peers held flirtations with death;



and away to the east they could look out over the green walls of the cwm to a faint line of hills” (405).

Cathy is occasionally frightened in the mountains; when she walks alone in the mist she thinks that the hills are “a queer place, all these stone castles, all so very untenanted” (399), or sometimes “a pitch was hard, and then the rock became an enemy, a challenge” (409). Once Cathy has to wait for a rescue party and keep vigil at the side of Doreen, one of the climbers from the hostel who has fallen. At this moment the mountains seem hostile and dangerous, and the protagonist experiences soul-chilling solitude because “[a]round them was black annihilation, and they two, two poor little bodies fighting to live, were the only warm things in an infinity of cold, indifferent stones” (415). This impression of the hills as malicious creatures waiting for a prey is shared by some other characters in the novel. For example, Michael Derwent, a greenhorn in terms of climbing, feels very exposed when he follows Cathy up a narrow crack: “[a]t once the rock seemed to close upon him like a pair of pincers. [...] Now the hateful crack was squeezing his shoulders, too. He felt as though half his chest were being ground to powder. The agony was excruciating, and the free half of him was, by contrast, so horribly unenclosed, so suspended over the void” (430).

But even in the worst moments Cathy manages to persuade herself that she is perfectly safe, and that the mountains are the places of glory and “her true home and heaven” (433). Yet, whether threatening or magnificent, the mountains are not so much the source of aesthetic delight for Cathy, as she “was still almost without conscious appreciation of beauty” (421), but stand for the pleasures she has experienced here: the feelings of belonging, of achievement and of freedom. It is only from the summit of Snowdon that she consciously begins to appreciate the sublimity of the mountains, where “a mile on one side was the precipice of Lliwedd; a mile on the other was the savage buttress of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu [...]. This was something from another world” (452). The view from the top instils the pleasant thought in Cathy that the mountain is a grand, mystical place and that at this moment she owns “a little slice of immensity” (453). When Cathy accompanies Christopher to Snowdon at night, she is gripped by the feeling that the “spirit, unconquerable, inhuman, of a great mountain” (463) dwells on the top, where the “pinnacles were fantastic, thousands of feet high” (463). On the summit of Snowdon, Cathy is mesmerized by the majestic landscape:

The scene was fantastic, toad-coloured; ink-blues, slate greys, livid green. The ridges stood out skeletal; stripped of its daylight trappings, the mountain showed its naked bones. Beyond, the lesser hills were smudges of dark grey against the

milkily luminous sky. Only water showed bright, a filigree of silver where the moonlight caught it. Tarns and llyns, there seemed to be hundreds upon hundreds of them; the gleaming shallows of the Traeth Mawr lay patterned like a necklace on the bosom of darkness; and beyond that again, a winking red line of lightships marked the boundaries of the sea.

An immense exaltation possessed her, as in moments of danger; but here there was no danger, only the sheer power which emanated from the mountain, from these upheaved masses of earth and stone. (463-64)

The protagonist is overwhelmed by the grandeur of the scene, but Cathy's inner world is even more affected by the meaning the mountain has acquired in her understanding. Cathy, like, for example, Vernon Rand, establishes a special connection with the mountains; she imagines that she is the mountain. Such an exceptional bond helps the protagonist in difficult moments of her life. When Cathy breaks up with Chris and decides to marry Bill and devote herself to keeping him on the right track, she finds comfort in the thought that the mountain has become the kernel of her soul and has developed into an entity that will always give her strength, even if the protagonist knows she will not return to the Welsh idyll she has known climbing in Cae Capel:

And first she began to hear the mountain – the rustle of the wind through the dry heather, a chough's cry, a stone falling somewhere under the snow. Then she began to feel it, to feel the solid strength of rock under the soft covering of heather, penetrating her own flesh to her bones, to her core. She could feel the movement, the wheeling of the earth through the heavens. *You are the mountain*, someone had said long ago. Now it was almost true, and in that was comfort. She would carry a part of the mountain with her always. That was another thing that nobody would take away. (509)

## **The Presentation of Character**

### **The Protagonist**

There are a number of climbers presented in *One Green Bottle* ranging from complete novices (Michael Derwent) to the ultimate mountaineers (Sharland, the Everester), from mediocre (Harry and Stan) to prodigy climbers (Cathy and Johnny Holliger). Apart from Cathy, they are mostly flat characters, playing only a supporting role in the development of the story. Cathy, the central figure of the novel, is a dynamic character who develops in the course of the narrative from an utter greenhorn to an outstanding climber. Moreover, through the experience of the mountains she is transformed from a Birkenhead slums guttersnipe in a person eager to improve herself, possessing keen aesthetic appreciation of nature, and who is awakened to the satisfaction of selfless actions for the sake of the more disadvantaged.

Cathy Canning is a complete novice when she first comes to the mountains but quite soon she grows into a promising climber and then becomes the star female performer of the region.

After the first trip to the hills, Cathy is fascinated by the new world she has discovered, and, like Artemis Phillips, Vernon Rand, Daniel Corder, Eric Shipton, Edmund Hillary, Jon Krakauer and Anatoli Boukreev, tries to fit her life into her climbing schedule. For example, she changes her job to have Saturdays off, rebels against her mother's pleas for more money, and sleeps with Leonard Head so that she can keep his sister's climbing boots as pay for the 'pleasure'. Climbing becomes the centre of Cathy's universe: "[a]ll her spare money went on climbing equipment; she had ceased to care what she looked like at home. Nothing mattered now except the feel of the crag, and the scent of the wet rope on it, and the gradual, splendid confidence of a body learning what it needed to know" (397).

From the Tooley Street point of view, Cathy is a lost case, going away for the week-ends, spending her time in a dubious youth hostel, and climbing. It is generally believed that "[t]he lass must have a screw loose" (398). But with time, Cathy is influenced by the mountains and by climbing in a very positive way. She stops being on the defensive all the time and starts to radiate some inner calmness. Her physical appearance changes as well: "[w]hen she first came she had had nothing of beauty but her great mane of red hair. But now she was losing that water-rat look; her face was

filling out and taking on a faint colour, and her eyes, without that challenging stare, were the blue-grey of moonstones" (403).

By and by Cathy becomes a first-rate climber who "almost never now had the sensation of fear. Her body seemed to know its way up the rock" (409), and whom one of her climbing companions describes as "exquisite, so light and sure," inspiring "a feeling of utter confidence" (409).

Cathy's most frequent partners, Harry and Stan, are overjoyed at her development and at her skills and guts. Yet the protagonist notices their hesitance to follow when she leads on more challenging routes. The reason of their reluctance is not made explicit at first, the possibilities being Cathy's gender or her shorter experience on the rock. Later in the novel Cathy is equally reluctant to second,<sup>79</sup> her protégés. Nevertheless, the protagonist is upset at her supposition that her gender might be the reason of her friends' attitude. Additionally, Cathy feels disadvantaged by being a girl when she is trying to prove herself to be as good as any man, but is disappointed by her lesser physical strength. Cathy is yearning for the recognition of her male companions (as there seem to be no female climbers worth mentioning after Doreen's fall). It is for this reason that Cathy is overexcited when Johnny Hollinger, a local prodigy climber, invites her to climb as his second and feels that "[s]he had arrived" (425). This offer becomes a true acknowledgement of her talent and skills, but she is petrified when she sees the route, which looks nothing less but appalling. Yet Cathy, like Rand from *Solo Faces*, seems to experience only a moment's hesitation on the rock: "[s]he started in a horrible solitude, a loneliness more complete than any she had known as leader. At first she was fumbling, indefinite, cowed by the relentless steepness of the crag. Then, as the fascination of the problem gripped her, she lost consciousness of everything except the immediate conquest of each new move" (427).

Despite momentary heavy feelings, these are the instants when Cathy knows "the absorption of a body used to the uttermost. She lived as never before" (427). The experience of the rocks transforms the protagonist inwardly and outwardly. The change becomes most obvious through the eyes of Michael Derwent, Dorothy's fiancé, who initially dismisses Cathy as a "little thing" with "a lot of red hair and a set of very proletarian features" (429), but who is astonished by the girl's metamorphosis on the mountain: "[n]ot till she began to climb did he really look at her again; and then, he noticed with surprise, her whole appearance seemed to change. She lost that plebeian

---

<sup>79</sup> A second is a climber who belays and follows a leader and is less exposed of the two. To second is to follow and belay the leader.

look as she moved purposefully, delicately up the sheet of slabs, her hair like a flaming flower, and he had the curious fancy that the face she turned to the rock must be tender and charming” (429).

Mountains bring Cathy one more advantage: her success in climbing has made her famous and a head-turner in Cae Capel, thus improving her marital prospects. But despite good chances of leaving the slums and marrying a nice guy, Cathy decides to give up climbing, to go back to Tooley Street and to marry Bill Powel because she feels responsible for the weak petty delinquent who stole in order to win the protagonist’s affection. As Cathy explains her decision, “I reckon somebody’s got to look after the weak ones” (407).

When told from Cathy’s point of view, the novel reveals no opposition of sexes in climbing or of sexist disposition toward *women climbers* but there are instances of such when general social norms are discussed, although the protagonist seems less perceptive to them than the reader. Thus there is a hint of Harry’s dismissive attitude towards Cathy in terms of socially imposed gender roles. For example, Cathy voices her well-founded dislike of Mr. Derwent, Dorothy’s fiancé, for the display of his possessiveness towards and patronising manner of treating Dorothy, but Harry waves it away as a fit of “lesbian jealousy” (426), where there is none of it. The protagonist’s concern is not Michael’s contempt for her, as a woman and working class, because “behind possible insults to her virtue lay the infinitely worse consequence that Dorothy might be made to look silly. [...] in her [Cathy’s] heart she felt that her friend was humiliated by the fatal weakness of not knowing” (433) that her fiancé most probably had been cheating on her for a long time.

Another time Cathy is thoroughly vexed by Michael’s machismo, especially when he, an absolute amateur in climbing, is trying to tell the protagonist what they should climb. Eventually he yields to Cathy’s suggestion of a route, but does it “with an air of pandering to female whims which she found intensely irritating” (435). Cathy finds it equally annoying when Michael calls her “a little bit of a thing” (436), and even more so when he makes very frank advances on her in a rather contemptuous way: “Curious that though you’re not beautiful and don’t begin to be pretty one should wish to sleep with you just the same” (436). After Cathy’s vehement rejection Michael makes another sexist remark: “Why must women find it necessary to go through this elaborate pretence?” (436), or “It’ll [sex with Cathy] give me extraordinary satisfaction, and it won’t do you the slightest harm” (437).

Later Michael explains his urge to get Cathy by his desire to belong, to achieve a connection with the mountains, become one with the rock through her: “If I’d met you anywhere else I’d never have looked at you. But when I watched you climbing, you seemed a part of them [the hills]. I felt that by having you I’d be a part of them too. You are the mountain” (439).

### **Other Climbing Characters**

Johnny Hollinger is a prodigy climber. Unlike Sharland (who is hardly described, yet has the aura of reverence around him), Johnny is presented as an imp and a person devoid of any firm moral principles except *carpe diem*. It is justifiable to assert that *One Green Bottle* testifies to a shift of focus from a respectable gentleman mountaineer (like Shipton or Hillary) to a rowdy climber (Vernon Rand, Jack Cabot, Daniel Corder, Scott Fischer), a type which became more popular in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Harry’s eyes, Johnny is “a liar, and a shirker, and I’m not even sure that he’s quite honest. But he’s always good for a laugh, and the prettiest performer on rock that I’m ever likely to see [...], just to think of the way he climbs does me good” (393). Johnny’s, as well as Cathy’s character presentation resembles the way climbers are portrayed nowadays, with all their virtues and vices. Yet this mode of presentation was not readily accepted in the 1950s and the novel was characterised as “told with frank modern realism”, and featuring “a rough, tough amoral little guttersnipe” (Knowlton 333) as the protagonist.

Johnny is a little disrespectful lad, presumably in his late twenties, crag-happy, too confident of his climbing skills, taking too many risks in Harry’s point of view. But when Cathy goes on a climb with him and sees him perform, she is entranced, because

his movements on the rock were beauty. Had she ever seen a ballet she might have compared his to a dancer’s grace. He floated; on the hardest moves he seemed to fly. He could adhere to the face with one hand or one foot, could transfer his whole weight in a flash, yet he never jerked or hurried, but preserved an equable flow. The performance opened up for her new worlds, forever, most probably, beyond her reach. (427)

Despite Johnny’s disrespect for people’s feelings and his concern only with his comfort and happiness, he is a fundamentally likable character and conforms to the image of a modern prodigy climber. He possesses extraordinary climbing skills, but “[i]n him, genius did not take any didactic or missionary form. He just happened to be able to climb” (427). Johnny is like an animal, a lizard in the sun, whose life priority is climbing. He, like Cathy, is changed by the hills, his face during climbing becomes

“rapt, self-forgetful, quite unlike the face he presented to the world” (443). Cathy, on the one hand, is fascinated by his attitude to life, but on the other hand, she is smart enough to know that there is life besides climbing. The protagonist predicts Johnny Rand’s fate, e.g., lonely ageing filled only with the memories of the better days: “[s]he saw him forty years hence, a little shrivelled nut, a mountain bachelor, with nothing to show for all the skill and courage, all the grace and beauty that had been his” (428).

Harry and Stan are good climbers but they will never reach Johnny’s performance level. Once Harry admits to Cathy with some regret: “I’ll never be more than a dependable second-rater. I just haven’t got the something it takes for these high flights” (428). The same is true of Stan.

Harry is the one who starts Cathy on climbing and recognizes her great climbing talent. He is also the one to suggest that “women ought to make the best climbers” (484). Yet Harry expresses a general opinion of the day, repeated by Dorothy, Johnny and others, that once a girl is married it means the end of her climbing career.

### **Climbing Philosophy**

At the beginning of the novel, Cathy does not seem to have a mind of her own regarding the philosophical meaning of the mountains, thus she absorbs the notions related to her from her climbing friends from the youth hostel. The protagonist accepts the common opinion which “deplored the view of nature as a gymnasium and of mountains as greased poles. So did all the climbers at the hostel; they regularly condemned mere athleticism” (398). It is believed that reaching summits is for walkers “who had to reach them in order to have anything to talk about” (398). At first, mountains mean to Cathy nothing but a place to meet friends and to go climbing. The protagonist likes the process of getting up a rock and the feeling of achievement.

It is only while staying with badly injured Doreen until the rescue party comes that Cathy begins to contemplate and understand the ways of the mountains. In only a few moments the mountain has been transformed from scenery to a playground and then to an entity, alive, breathing. Through the experience of Doreen’s fall Cathy adopts a belief widely expressed in mountaineering literature: a mountain is a thinking creature and it will severely punish mistakes and disrespect:

And now at last it [the mountain] had its own life, independent of her pleasure, terrible, remote; its own laws, which her friends had been trying all these weeks to teach her, and to which she [Cathy] had carelessly, impatiently conformed. At any moment she might have forgotten them, and it only needed a moment, a second of forgetfulness for the mountain to take its revenge. (415)

As in *Solo Faces*, *The Ascent*, *Into Thin Air*, *The Climb*, and *Beyond The Mountain*, one of the main reasons for a mountain’s ‘wrath’ is spiritual corruption and a lack of reverence toward the mountain. In *One Green Bottle*, Cathy becomes suddenly aware that she should not feel too competitive towards her climbing colleagues, neither should she be vain because she believes that Doreen’s fall has been punishment for her haughtiness, and rivalry, and “[t]his was the answer the mountain gave to those who used it as a stage” (415).



### **The Meaning of Climbing**

The first time Cathy comes to the Welsh hills, she has no idea what the rocks will mean to her. But as soon as she starts scrambling up the hill, Cathy feels elated and grows oblivious of all the worries and disappointments of the 'outer' world: "[s]he lost all sense of time. She forgot Leonard and her anger, Bill and her grief. In every fibre of her body she lived" (378). When Cathy returns to Birkenhead from her first climbing trip she starts to associate the mountains with beauty and purity and her hometown and the slums with dirt and misery: "[a]s she opened the front door she learnt something new about her home: it smelt.... But now for the first time she was able to compare it with places that had only the cold smell of the rain and the hills, and she stood wrinkling her nose in irrepressible disgust" (385).

The mountains offer Cathy escape, romance and adventure: here "[y]ou saw nothing, thought of nothing, but the step ahead" (392), the hills become the source of "uncontrollable exaltation" (393). As in numerous mountaineering texts, climbing is seen to bring Cathy something she has lacked or has not known at home: camaraderie and the feeling of belonging. During her long work-days in the laundry the thought of climbing brings the protagonist happiness and relief, "it glowed inside her with a secret pleasure, and often [...] a spasm of fierce joy would transform her face" (397). When Cathy imagines the hills, the reader senses an atmosphere of awe and veneration. For her, like for Vernon Rand, the mountains are associated with everything heavenly and sublime whereas the town stands for the mundane and even abysmal: "[i]t was going at one bound from the bottom to the top; from the sordid noise of Tooley Street and the cheerful noise of the laundry to the great gaunt silence of the rain-swept precipice; from the dull plod of shoes on pavements to the delicate dancer's touch of a tiptoe nail on a tiny hold; from apathetic safety to danger and life" (397). It is only on the rocks that Cathy thrives; here she knows "the ecstasy of dancing above thin air" (410).

***Beyond the Mountain.* Elizabeth Arthur**

**The Novel**

*Beyond the Mountain* is written by a non-climbing American author and a creative writing professor Elizabeth Arthur and was first published in 1983. The novel was met with a variety of responses ranging from high praise for being a very elegant and sensuous book to criticism for its shallow characters (Jervis). Beside the novel under consideration, Arthur has written extensively on topics such as the wilderness, harsh landscapes and survival. These themes are present in *Looking for the Klondike Stone*, *Bad Guys*, *Island Sojourn* and *Antarctic Navigation*.

### **The Plot**

Artemis is a part of the famous climbing team Phillips, Phillips and Rhodes, consisting of her brother Orion Phillips, herself and her husband Nicholas Rhodes. After years of a rather destructive relationship with Nicholas the narrator decides to leave him. At the same time she receives an invitation to join an all-woman expedition to Everest, which she believes to be a perfect chance of gaining some emotional distance in order to resolve the difficult situation. Very suddenly the narrator's world is shattered to pieces: Orion and Nicholas are killed in an avalanche and Artemis is spared only to be plagued by feelings of sorrow, guilt and remorse. Now the protagonist decides to join the expedition to Everest in the quest of making peace with herself and with the world.

The climb gives Artemis a much-needed perspective on her life, the main aspect of which has been her relationship with her brother Orion, sometimes crossing the borders of a usual siblings' affection for each other, and a difficult and controversial, at times no-holds-barred relationship with her husband Nicholas, who "pitted his contempt against [her] obdurateness and held [her] that way by the bonds of [her] own personality" (78). Retrospectively Artemis describes it as "a technique that bears a marked resemblance to giving someone a rope long enough to hang himself" (78).

On her way to Everest Artemis begins to feel life gradually returning to her, but it is only after spending eight days in a tent in a raging storm and nearly dying in it that she feels freed from her guilt, her memories and the demons of her past.

### **The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime**

On the very first climb to the top of a mountain, Artemis is awakened to the sublimity of nature and that of the mountain landscape. When she glimpses the mountain she is trying to ascend with her brother, Artemis feels a wild surge of joy and emotion; she feels delivered and connected to the landscape. The protagonist becomes a constituent part of nature, and mountains become a part of her most inner self:

[...] a mountain grew, ethereal, transitory, vulnerable to the touch of a finger. I started to cry when I saw it. It felt as if someone had hit me in the chest right above the heart, knocking the wind from my lungs and most of myself from my body; as if I had been lifted out of myself and was floating freely, somewhere in the air above my head, untethered, waiting to be pulled back down. There was a luminosity about the world, a transparent, diaphanous clarity, white snow and great space and forms below that space that lay across its slopes like slabs of time, complete; one of those forms, as long as I lived, one of those forms was me. I was me, and the world was wide, with space not just below my feet but more, beyond the farthest reaches of my eyes, its luminosity something I was to see again and again, each time I climbed – when, after deep effort, there is a relaxation of the body and the spirit so complete that even the face relaxes, the eyes widen and the fingers dangle, used like all the notes of an instrument in a clarion explosion after which great silence seems to hide great laughter, just like the act of love. (25-26)

The feeling is so deep and overwhelming that it does not matter to Artemis any longer whether she will actually reach the top of this or any other mountain or not. Being here and experiencing this incredibly strong bond with the mountains is fulfilling enough. At such moments, Artemis realizes that for her the love of the mountains equals the love of life.

The protagonist equally embraces the Himalayas despite their desolation, vastness and bareness. Although she mentions that “we were now in big country, space so big it swallowed us up” (71), she seems to like the feeling of immersion in the life of the mountains, saying that Everest has brought their team “together in common cause, giving us a familiar setting around which to stage out evening meetings and to organize our acquaintance” (87-88). The whole atmosphere of the mountain, the Sherpas so strongly rooted in the present and their constant satisfaction with themselves and the world, villagers displaying curiosity towards the signs of the Western well-being but absolutely devoid of greed bring about a feeling of tranquillity and total bliss in Artemis. These are the things that make the two worlds so very different: one innocent, the other one corrupt by posing, consumerism and greed, plagued by “all the excesses and neuroses of Western civilization” (99). The protagonist yearns for existential

simplicity which the mountains can give her – the possibility “to feel just like [her]self” (92).

In Nepal, Artemis is overwhelmed by the beauty of the exotic landscape but even more so by little picturesque villages breathing calmness and a medieval spirit. Yet the closer the expedition gets to the mountains, the more do the climbers seem to be influenced by the beautiful but deadly landscape where “everything was so colossal. The land engulfed us like a storm” (139). But it is these landmarks that evoke in the protagonist emotions indicative of the feeling of the sublime. In such instances Artemis describes the scenery as “the world [...] so lovely that I ached” (198). On another occasion the protagonist is flabbergasted by a col, because “its vastness and its grandeur could almost have blown me away. A wind tore off its tumbled slopes, the sun was tickling its ruin” (151). As the narrator progresses, her emotions vacillate and the mixture of awe and fascination gives way to the growing feeling of trepidation induced by the landscape and by the implications of wandering in such a hostile environment. It is at these moments that Artemis comes to recognise that “beauty is just as terrible as fear” (158):

It wasn't just the avalanche. It was the snow bridges, the fog patches, the crevasses, the seracs. Everything was getting soggy and I kept hearing bridges collapse behind me with a squishy, plopping sound – like someone getting hit in the stomach and gasping in surprise. On the ascent, I was the last in line so I thought at least I was safe from crevasses, until, crossing one that no one knew was there, I stopped and looked at my feet and saw a piece of snow between them fall away like a piece of skeet, like a badly thrown Frisbee – white light turned to golden light and then to the deepest of deep blue, and I could see two hundred feet or more of space below me and no real bottom, but a curve and shadowed dark. The skin all over my body started registering heat and cold in flashing alternation and it felt as if my body were being controlled from a point at the base of my stomach. (155-156)

Accidents and hostile locations ‘pile up’ and place Artemis under immense psychological strain. But as the narrator finds herself and Naomi, her partner of the day, unscathed after a serac has fallen between them, she discovers that “not only was beauty as terrible as fear, but fear could be as beautiful as grace” (160), a revelation that brings her back to action and to life. The mountain revives Artemis but it also poses great dangers for the narrator and her companions as it lures Artemis and her friend Tina to the upper reaches and then pins them down by a bad storm with ferocious wind pushing and tossing the climbers in their tent like rag dolls: “[t]he wind shoved sometimes. Sometimes it roared and shrieked. Sometimes it curled and tangled like nets and sometimes it simply loomed. There was no escaping that wind” (186), and the mountain

which Artemis believes has returned her to life is now trying to claim its gift back. The protagonist mentions several times in her narration that she is willing to accept this flow of things and die on the mountain, but she is still teeming with unsaid things she needs to share with someone and with her memories she has been carrying like a burden: “I was beginning, finally, to feel that I would never leave the mountain and I knew then that I couldn’t die with so much still untold” (187).

## **The Presentation of Character**

### **The Protagonist**

The story is told through the first person major point of view. This mode of narration offers a greater intimacy with the protagonist and lets the reader follow Artemis' inner monologue. At the same time certain omniscience is present due to a difference between the experienced and the narrated time. While narrating, Artemis casts a retrospective glance on her life and analyses the decisions and actions of her younger self from the point of view of maturity, now possessing a greater knowledge of the events and understanding of their interconnectedness. Artemis is a reasonably reliable narrator and her mature self aims at objectivity of opinions and at a sound interpretation and evaluation of events. *Beyond the Mountain* tells an initiation story which ends with Artemis' epiphany she experiences on Everest. The experience of the mountain changes the protagonist.

By the time Artemis joins the Everest expedition she is "a well-known climber" (67) and is in a number of guidebooks. But she has never climbed with any other partners, believing that PPR-team was the best environment to realize her mountaineering potential. Only much later does Artemis realize that her love for Nicholas has always kept her from reaching her limits (see 17). She seems to have managed to liberate herself only after the decision to leave her husband, saying that "I felt I had been continually growing stronger, tougher, more able to cope, and that with every bit of growth I achieved – as a climber, as a seeker of truth – I was making it more and more difficult to stay interested in Nicholas" (70).

Artemis has felt a strong connection to few subjects, namely her brother, her husband and the mountains. But even in her relationships with both men, mountains are placed at the very centre of the protagonist's universe. Artemis feels such a strong bond with the mountains that she even hopes to die in the mountains when her time comes. In this way Artemis repeats the cliché closely connected with the image of the ultimate mountaineer who lives in the mountains and oftentimes dies there. The protagonist also voices this preference on behalf of her climb-mates. In some respect, this way of treating mortality is a comforting thought to her, which helps Artemis to come to terms with the loss of her two most loved people, Orion and Nicholas. For her, death is "a moment in a blue crevasse, a sudden fall through windy space, a perfect, gentle instant in the snow, when what has been becomes what is not and the sun, golden yellow,

shines down to waft you upward to the sky. I wanted to check out in the mountains and nowhere else, my feet on rock, my hands reaching for the silver clouds above. We all wanted that, I guess” (46).

Later in the novel, after Artemis and her climbing partner have barely escaped death under a collapsing serac, the narrator repeats the romantic cliché persisting in mountaineering literature: if/when she has to die, she would prefer to become part of what she loves: “I could certainly think of worse ways to go than checking out in a wedge of dark-blue ice, as fine and shadowed as a pair of eyes, on a day when spindrift dusted off the mountain like the wild hair of a child. No ghats, no rotting corpses, wild dogs. But a mountain; to be part of it forever” (160-161).

Yet this desire to die in the mountains is in no way a sign of suicidal inclinations, for the protagonist does not want to die. She responds to the tragic deaths of her husband and brother in a typical way for climbers who lose their partners on a climb. Artemis is overcome with the feeling of guilt that she did not die with Orion and Nicholas and with the grief that they perished so suddenly, that she had wanted to leave her husband and that she totally forgot about Nicholas after she had found her brother. Yet although it is mountains that take the most loved people from Artemis, she does not blame them, because it is only in the mountains that the protagonist experiences bliss. Climbing is infinitely fulfilling and outside it “[n]ever had [she] felt so graceful. Never had [she] been so sure. [She] was only a small parenthesis in time, but [she] felt [she] was climbing toward eternity” (62). Artemis, like the protagonists in *Solo Faces*, *The Ascent*, and *One Green Bottle*, is at one with the mountains and describes her feel of the mountains as proffering “what they demand. And the more you give them, the more they will give you” (62).

### **Other Climbing Characters**

Nicholas and Artemis first meet in a climbing club where he is the head instructor. He is described as a very skilled climber, who “moved from hold to hold as fluidly as a branch bends, and his fingertips [...] would be drawn to the stone as confidently as the roots of a ginkgo seek water” (107), but such descriptions are very cursory. The character presentation is mostly limited to the depiction of inter-personal relations, especially between Nicholas and Artemis. But the narrator describes Nicholas as the one trying to prove to himself that he exists by climbing the next mountain and the next, and who is never happy in the present because he is too focused on the future, and “[h]is



mountains, once climbed, sank down to sea level, and the whole of his thirty-one years became, in memory, a long undistinguished plain of sand. [...] No matter how many mountains he climbed, he had never climbed enough” (86).

Artemis is looking for the reason of such an attitude towards the mountains, and for the source of a special bond to the rocks Nicholas seemed to have. From the narrator’s point of view, Nicholas’ love for the mountains and his prodigy as a climber were anchored in “his ability to become one with the rock [...and] his absolute inability to become one with anything else” (104), a feature which undoubtedly also contributes to Vernon Rand’s climbing career.

The novel, however, deals predominantly with Artemis and Nicholas as people engaged in a troubled love-and-hate relationship, the basis and mortar of which is climbing. She confesses: “I knew that with us there could be no happy ending and that no calm friendship could emerge from the waters of our separation. Finally, I wanted to climb with him still; I wanted to climb with him forever” (176).

### **Climbing Philosophy**

*Beyond the Mountain* readily repeats the idea about spiritual corruption, which is punished by supernatural forces. In the novel, there is no deed deserving legal prosecution, not even a deed inappropriate according to social norms but rather one asking for an act of compassion. On the way to Base Camp, Artemis meets a Lyti<sup>80</sup> “with eyes and heart as full of life as a river” (98), but an outcast in her world. The protagonist’s immediate desire is to adopt the girl in order to spare her the fate of an untouchable. But eventually Artemis, like the climbers in *The Ascent*, simply leaves the girl to her fate. Later she interprets this incident as a breach of a moral code and brings her lack of action in cause-effect connection with the things which happen on the mountain, mentioning that “[a]fter that ... nothing went really wrong. But nothing went really right either. I kept remembering the girl, a child without even a name, and every step I took away from her seemed somehow like a betrayal. Not a betrayal of her, perhaps, but a betrayal of myself” (98).

Another breach of a moral code in the mountains, especially in big mountains, is ‘fornication.’ This concept comes from Sherpas, who used to strongly disapprove of love affairs on Everest, the sacred mountain. Although in the novel the Sherpas take an active part in the sex adventure of one of the team members, general discontent with the situation is sensed. Further on, the narrator links this episode with the death of a mute Sherpa, which could have been prevented if the mountaineers had been more attentive to the porters, to the disaster the expedition experiences on Everest.

As many disasters figuring in mountaineering literature, this one has its heralds, in a way, warning the climbers. Artemis recounts such instances, which exemplify the superstitions prevalent in the mountaineering world: a piton is pulled out, the narrator forgets to clip her rope in and almost falls, her climbing partner is almost engulfed by a crevasse, the weather is slightly friendlier than usual, that “consequently everything was taking on that delicate significance that makes you think the night is full of signs and symbols and even the simplest occurrences are portents of things to come” (166).

There is another episode in Artemis’ narrative suggestive of spiritual corruption leading to punishment by nature. In the morning of the day when Orion and Nicholas get killed while skiing in the mountains they refuse to take part in a rescue search for climbers lost in an avalanche. According to the moral code prevalent among

---

<sup>80</sup> “A term used to describe people who were either deaf and dumb or retarded or sometimes both” (97).

mountaineers, a human life is the highest priority. It is a moral obligation to abandon everything and join a rescue search, even if there is hardly any hope of finding climbers alive: “[...] we all felt guilty right away and told ourselves that there was no hurry to find a body, that it would be different if there was a chance the man was still alive – but we were all remembering other rescues when it turned out by some miracle that the man was still alive and we had been there to help him” (192).

But Artemis, Orion and Nicholas go skiing for pleasure and ironically become themselves victims of another avalanche. As in numerous examples of mountaineering literature, the cause-effect relation between such events is never pointed out explicitly but a suggested divine intervention establishing the balance of things is always just beneath the surface. It is further confirmed by the narrator’s belief that “whatever you make other people suffer at your hands will be returned to you someday” (190).

In a way continuing the tradition of topics recurrent in mountaineering literature, the aspect of outside pressure is shortly touched upon. It is relayed in the same key it is presented in *Upon That Mountain*, *The Ascent*, *Solo Faces*, *Into Thin Air* and *The Climb*: outside pressure always leads to disaster. In *Beyond the Mountain*, Artemis alludes to several events in the history of mountaineering, which she interprets as a destructive element in climbing:

As if the fate of the German Eiger climbers in the thirties<sup>81</sup> had not proved that climbing for the Fatherland or any other grand conception was a surefire way to get killed. And in the case of the Soviet women,<sup>82</sup> they seemed intent on climbing not just for Mother Russia but for the honor of all women everywhere. [...] And it couldn’t have helped them much to realize that they were the focus of a big internecine squabble in Russia about the wisdom of letting women do anything at all without male leadership. (36)

---

<sup>81</sup> Karl Mehringer and Max Sedlmayr who froze to death on the Eiger North Wall in 1935.

<sup>82</sup> The Soviet women’s expedition to Lenin Peak in 1974, who all died in a storm near the summit.

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

According to her own assertion, climbing is the most essential part of Artemis' life, it is the centre of her existence and it provides a frame for her relationships with other people, especially with her brother Orion and her husband Nicholas. Reviewing her life the narrator admits that actually climbing was probably the only thing that kept her and Nicholas together, because their "moments on the rope were the still points of peace around which [their] relationship revolved" (114-115).

The most significant climb for Artemis Phillips is Mt. Everest. At first it is regarded as a soft way to leave her husband, Nicholas, but then it turns into something completely different. After Nicholas and Orion have died in the avalanche, the expedition to Everest becomes a metaphor for the Buddhist life goal: to stop desiring, to forget and to accept. Artemis is rather emphatic about it: "[e]nough of that, that longing. Look where it gets you in the end. The longing for something beyond oneself, the craving to possess – a man, a summit, the world, the truth. I'd always wanted it all. And after the accident I wanted something else – oblivion, I guess, temporary but complete" (14).

For the protagonist her trip to the Himalaya is not an attempt to escape from the world or her desires but to simplify them through the climb of the highest mountain. She is yearning for some perspective on her life gained through the distance and total focus on Everest, where there will be "no falling in love again, no convolutions of human relations, but the simplicity of a mountain, gold and silver in the first light of morning, a promise of completion carved hard against the sky" (15). There is a feeling that Artemis' desire to find her way to the mountain is a metaphor for coming to terms with the past and finding her footing in life again. She is also trying to find her peace of mind in Nepal by escaping the Western world, branded by "the lust to have more, know more, be more" (33). For Artemis climbing, and especially climbing in the Himalayas brings "a heightened state of concentrated awareness" (101) and also becomes "the way of a person facing death" (101).

The expedition to Everest has an additional meaning for Artemis apart from the straightforward reason of climbing the highest mountain in the world. This all-woman climb is an attempt for Artemis to discover her identity. She feels lost, not belonging and searches for herself as a woman, a representative of her gender. The protagonist wants to know whether she would fit among women, since until the accident she had

identified herself through her brother and her husband and had never had much to do with women, thinking that she “understood them even less than [she] did men” (35). Yet even being already on an expedition the protagonist is not sure she wants to go to the end. She is not sure what she is going to find, what she wants to find at the end:

I'd been afraid to let myself understand, afraid that on close examination women would turn out to be everything men have sometimes claimed them to be – devious, perhaps, or manipulative, cowardly or undisciplined – and that would be a bad piece of news to acquire. Obviously, it would mean that my own conception of myself was nothing but a chimera. Or perhaps there was the even worse fear that men's judgements would turn out to be nonsense and that actually women were just men in disguise. Even worse because, whatever the difficulties of being a woman in a man's world, I certainly didn't want to be a man. (35)

Apart from the search for herself, Artemis' trip to Nepal turns out to be her reawakening to life after the disaster. Experiencing the simplicity of life there and being in the mountains make the protagonist hope, make her feel alive again. More than that, Artemis speaks of her journey to the Himalayas as a search for a feeling of being delivered she once experienced climbing with her husband and watching his prodigious climbing. Retrospectively Artemis mocks herself for going to Nepal and expecting to “trip over revelation, intersect epiphany on the trail” (105). Yet all she experiences is the disillusionment also sensed in *Solo Faces*. At first climbing does not provide solutions to the protagonists' problems, and at the foot of Everest she feels “a greater sense of disconnectedness from the possibility of answers than [she] had felt for months” (105). But in Nepal Artemis does find what she has been looking for – the sense of communion she feels with the little Lyti and with an anonymous yak herder, who shares his meal and his blanket with the narrator. Artemis and the Nepalese are divided by the language- and society- barriers but, strangely enough, it is with them that she feels fully alive and no longer lonely.

The meaning of climbing as Artemis' longing to return to life, to be involved in it as she used to be before the avalanche is symbolised in the title of the book *Beyond the Mountain*. After the accident everything seems to have stopped, the protagonist herself suspended, withdrawn from life. Going to Everest Artemis hopes for her awakening from the stupor she has been suffering since the loss of Orion and Nicholas: “Beyond the mountain a cloud hovered, a [...] cloud that didn't touch the summit but stood above the stillness of its upper reaches, a ghost cloud waiting, like me, to be sucked back in, to the spell of the mountain” (151).

However, it is not only the return back to life Artemis is looking for in the mountains, neither is it the summit of Everest per se. For the narrator being on the mountain is the search for “the path that leads to enlightenment” (199) and the path to forgiveness. And although Artemis fails to reach the top of Everest and almost dies in the storm with Tina, she reaches a symbolic summit, knowing that “the summit is never quite where you thought it would be” (201), because when the narrator left for Nepal she did not know what she was looking for. Only after her life-and-death experience on the upper reaches of Everest does she realize what ‘the summit’ for her is. Now Artemis feels freed from the feeling of guilt for wanting to leave Nicholas, for surviving the avalanche and for finding Orion and not her husband first; she is no longer “sodden now with memory, not damned with it” (204). Now she can forgive herself and live her life.

## The Presentation of the Character of the Climber: New Tendencies Gay Mountaineering Literature

### *Todhra*. Dennis Gray

Dennis Gray is a British climber and writer, born in 1935. He started climbing when he was eleven and in his mountaineering career he climbed with a number of accomplished climbers, Tom Patey, Robin Campbell, Arthur Dolphin, among others. He also participated in numerous first ascents in Kenya, the Andes and the Himalaya. Gray was the first General Secretary of the British Mountaineering Council (1971-1989) and is a lecturer and a track leader.

Gray's literary work consists of two biographies *Rope Boy* (1970) and *Mountain Lover* (1990), two books of stories, *Tight Rope* (1993) and *Slack* (1998), a poem collection *Poems From the Edge* (2003), a novel *Todhra* (2005), as well as numerous essays and articles.

### The Novel

*Todhra* is claimed to be the first gay climbing novel, and in his review of the book Marc Chrysanthou on the UKClimbing.com forums points out that

[a]lthough 'Gay Literature' (e.g. William Burroughs, James Baldwin, Allan Hollinghurst) is a clearly established genre – with whole bookcases of Waterstones groaning under gay writers - climbing literature, by comparison, boasts only a small subterranean current of homoerotic climbing literature written by professional men of gay or ambiguous sexuality (e.g. Winthrop Young, Menlove Edwards and Wilfrid Noyce). (Chrysanthou)

The events in this novel are related in a straight-forward manner without many flashbacks, flash-forwards or cross-references. An authoritative limited omniscient voice dominates the narrative, characterizing the protagonist, giving evaluations to events and offering explanations of climbing techniques and jargon, similar to those employed in *Solo Faces*.

Short action episodes are sprinkled with extended, true-to-life route and movement descriptions as well as rather detailed scenes of intimacy, all related in a reported-speech mode. The presentation of characters is informative rather than masterful or imaginative.

Because of its literary shortcomings in terms of the depth of the characters and subtlety of inner-conflict presentation, the novel has not yet become a trend-setter. However, the theme of homosexuality and, probably, its clash with a certain machismo existent in the climbing environment will continue to surface every so often.

The novel has a distinctly melodramatic character and is rich in love at first sight (at third, at the most), wealthy, refined but very lonely aristocrats and many tragic twists of fate.



## **The Plot**

John Firth is an English prodigy climber in his prime, who has just successfully finished another ‘first’, this time in Morocco, seconded by his best friend, Duncan Yates, where they have climbed the Todhra Gorge.<sup>83</sup> Todhra becomes a metaphor for another culmination – John has an affair with a Berber boy, Lahcen, who becomes the protagonist’s first big love, which does not stop him, however, from further homosexual escapades, first in Marrakech and then back in Europe. John is too shy to reveal himself but he willingly yields to the numerous approaches of boys or young men who recognize him for what he is.

John’s sexuality, although a source of many pleasant experiences, constitutes a major problem for the protagonist because of his fear to be rejected by his friends and ostracised from the mountaineering community if they learn about it. John finds solace in Paris with the help of Roger James, a former school mate of the protagonist and also a gay, who introduces John to his friends on the Parisian homosexual scene. It is in Paris that the protagonist becomes involved with an incredibly wealthy French aristocrat, Vincent Rouilly de Genet, “the youngest son of the Baron de Genet, the *crème de la crème*” (69).

John spends much time climbing in England, but one of his great ambitions is winter climbing in Chamonix, and the Walker Spur is high up on the list. Unfortunately, on one of the climbs his companion, Steve Hart, falls to his death. John is left on the mountain without proper gear but he manages to descend. Weak and delirious he is rescued by his lover, Vincent, who has taken his father’s plane in order to find John. The protagonist’s feet are badly frostbitten but he is expected to make a good recovery.

The fate has prepared another blow for John: at one of the climber parties the protagonist is framed-up and the whole climbing community finds out that he is a gay. John is beaten up but what hurts most is the rejection by his best friend, Duncan, who is devastated by the revelation and even more so by the fact that “John had never taken him into his confidence, never levelled with him” (95). The rest of the community shuns the protagonist for some time to embrace him again a short time later. Duncan forgives the protagonist as well and even invites him to take part in an expedition to Nanga Parbat to try the first ascent of its North West face. Unfortunately, shortly after John has reached the top Duncan is killed by an avalanche while filming the climb. Shocked by

---

<sup>83</sup> The Todhra Gorge is situated on the east side of the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco.

the accident, John receives another blow several days later: a friend calls to let him know that Vincent has died in a car crash. John is named as the main beneficiary in Vincent's will and inherits a chateau, a flat in the best quarter of Paris and Vincent's shares in the family companies, that make the protagonist an instant millionaire.

After Vincent's death John decides to go back to Morocco and to find Lahcen, but it turns out to be another disillusionment as John realises that the young Berber is not a homosexual and has merely tried to use the protagonist in order to get out of the country. Disappointed, John is open to new encounters, which go quite wrong and the protagonist gets drugged and raped. This experience and then John's own near-fatal fall on a climb after his Morocco trip bring him closer to Roger with whom John starts what is expected to be a long-lasting relationship. Despite his serious injuries, John is resolved to climb again because he needs "to feel the rock face under his hands" (179).

### **The Landscape of Climbing. The Sublime**

From the very first lines of the book the reader is fleetingly introduced to the landscape where John Firth is seen to be climbing impressive and formidable slopes of the Todhra Gorge in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. After the climb the protagonist and his climbing partner, Duncan, stand transfixed at the scene of sunset with the sky “catching on fire in the west” (15), the like of which neither of the friends has seen before.

John is equally mesmerized by Marrakech with its countless musicians, story tellers, snake charmers, food and spices stalls and the like, which create the atmosphere of exoticism for the protagonist. This is a different, almost a fairy-tale world, which encourages John to follow his inner desires.

The scene changes then to Britain, where John is seen to climb in Llanberis in a very abysmal November weather with cold, rain and gale-force winds. The next climb takes John to Scotland, equally prominent by the challenges it poses for climbing in the cold seasons. A short description reveals that “[w]inter climbing in Scotland is the most demanding form of mountaineering available in Britain. The scale of the ascents often requires pre-dawn starts, and major climbs are regularly not completed until long after the night sets in” (53).

Ben Nevis presents a particularly hostile environment with its ice-glazed rocks, the winds rising with every second, whipping spindrift into one’s face and dagger-like icicles hurtling down (see 53). The huge and extremely steep walls of Ben Nevis, “smeared with verglas and chocked with ice” (53), push even the best climbers to their limits, yet for John this eerie winter landscape also becomes the source of the feeling of the sublime when “the wind sculptured wonderful crenulations in the snow. The cornice above his head looked like the prow of a mighty ocean liner, steaming away from its moorings” (54). The climbers’ awareness of constant mortal danger on these rocks contributes to the exaltation felt at the completion of the climb.

When the protagonist goes climbing in France, he is overwhelmed by “one of the most beautiful landscapes John ha[s] ever seen” (66), which has “an eeriness in parts of the woods, compounded by the slight covering of freshly fallen snow, and a depth of silence which made him forget the pain” (66).

The Grand Jorasses becomes the scene of action when John goes winter climbing with his occasional partner Steve Hart. The Alps in winter harbour even greater dangers than Ben Nevis because of steeper and taller mountains, larger distances

and lower temperatures. The feeling of constant threat and vulnerability accompany the two friends on every climb. Steve and John are impressed by their new route, where “[a]fter a steep ice field they had followed a series of shallow grooves and cornices, interspersed with steep ice flows on the immense grey granite wall on the left flank of The Croz Spur” (78) and where the gaping mouths of the bergschrund look like the lips of the monster. Through the landscape both climbers become more conscious of their mortality and that due to insufficient protection “a fall from the final moves of that pitch could have proved fatal” (78).

Steve and John pursue the same ambitions that Vernon Rand and Jack Cabot are obsessed with in *Solo Faces*, The Walker Spur in the Mont Blanc Range, “the most famous climb in the whole massif, [...] an enormous buttress of rock and ice over 1400 metres high” (79). For John, this landscape becomes overlaid with the history of previous climbs and disasters and more imposing because of it. Yet, it is only on Nanga Parbat,<sup>84</sup> where the North West face of the mountain dominates the scene that John experiences the apogee of his aesthetic appreciation of the landscape. He is mesmerised by the grandeur of the mountain and awed by the sublime views from its faces as well as by the immense power of the elements. Like the Alps, the landscape of Nanga Parbat is laden with mountaineering myths, the most memorable of which is the epic of Herman Buhl’s<sup>85</sup> ascent in 1953, described in his *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage*. In a way the protagonist feels he follows Buhl in his footsteps as John and Duncan are “the first to attempt the North West face of the peak, the last unclimbed bastion of Nanga Parbat” (124). Especially the first days on the mountain inspire John with trepidation: “[h]anging glaciers occasionally caused huge avalanches from the flanks. It felt like being in the middle of a battle and they [John and Duncan] had anxiously ventured up to the base of the wall. The mountain seemed to groan before an explosion of falling snow rushed down the face, leaving clouds of particles” (124).

With the flow of time the climbers get used to the immanent dangers but they are keenly aware of all the threats this hostile place has in store: avalanches, hidden crevasses, stone or ice-falls, etc. As John is climbing the last pitch to the top of the mountain he experiences weird exaltation drawn from the formidable landscape and his

---

<sup>84</sup> It is the ninth highest mountain in the world and one of the most challenging mountains in the Himalaya.

<sup>85</sup> Herman Buhl (1924-1957) was an Austrian mountaineer, considered one of the best climbers of all times who completed the first ascent of Nanga Parbat. What made the climb even more impressive was the fact that he did it solo, without oxygen, having spent a night standing on a narrow ledge, only sparingly clad.

precarious position, where “[t]he exposure was fantastic, with nothing below but thousands of metres of space” (135).

As in many mountaineering texts, John’s summit experience is quite anticlimactic. He is too tired to be excited and the visibility is almost nonexistent because of an approaching storm: “[t]here was no view, nothing to see but the whirling snow” (136). Only the realization that he is the first one to have climbed this wall makes John’s heart beat faster.

## **The Presentation of Character**

### **The Protagonist**

*Todhra* is centred on a homosexual character, John Firth, who is not the first gay climber featured in mountaineering literature but undoubtedly is the first gay protagonist. Other climbing characters with gay or bisexual inclinations are found, among others, in Simon Mawer's *The Fall*, in John Harrison's *Climbers* and Rodger Hubank's *Hazard's Way*. In all other respects the presentation of John's character conforms to the images commonly applied to a modern climber: a strong climber with excellent skills who is depicted with all his virtues and vices.

The events are presented from the third-person omniscient perspective with John Firth as the focalizer of the narrative but where the reader is given insight into other characters' unspoken thoughts and feelings. Very strong authorial voice comments on events and actions, and offers evaluative judgements of characters, which leads to the dominance of the direct presentation in the novel.

All the basic information about the protagonist is poured onto the reader in the first two pages of the novel, when he is trying to make the first ascent of the Direct on the Central Pillar of the Todhra Gorge: John Firth is 25, has been climbing for 12 years, is 5'8" and weighs 62kg. For him "life was a total dedication to climbing" (5), his ambition sometimes overrides common sense and he aims at "making a bold statement about commitment in the sport and the need to conserve the natural environment" (5). The omniscient presentation reveals John's high opinion of his own climbing abilities when he thinks that most of his rock climbing peers "would have wet their Lycra shorts on a climb like this, might not have had the determination to get this far" (6). But, as though to justify John's high opinion of himself, an authorial comment informs the reader that John Firth is one of the elite mountaineers in Britain.

Already on the third page of the novel a new revelation is made: John is a gay and "a sensuous pleasure from holding onto the rock" parallels "one other sensation like this, when his hands used to touch Alan" and brings a picture of the "muscular body of his closest school friend" (7). At this point, John Firth's thoughts disclose his reservations about unfolding his true self to his climbing colleagues, as "[i]n the climbing world, such a confession would have been met with sneering disapproval" (7) because "the climbers [are] too macho, too chauvinistic" (41).

As is often the case with climbers, John is a college drop-out and “a climbing bum, surviving by doing odd jobs and drawing benefit” (8) who hopes for sponsorships for his future climbs.

John Firth is a flat character. Although he is in the process of identity search and of coming to terms with his sexuality, and is described by means of the images typical for the descriptions of a prodigy climber, he lacks complexity as well as emotional and mental depth. The over-all characterization of John can be captured in just a few words: ‘a prodigy climber afraid to admit he is gay.’ Moreover, John’s inner conflict in terms of his sexuality seems to work from within an out-dated frame of social norms. The novel is set in the 1990s but the protagonist is afraid of being psychologically or even physically abused and as a reason for his apprehension refers to Menlove Edwards’ sad fate.<sup>86</sup> Besides, there are other gay climbers presented in the novel and, although not very overt about their homosexuality in public, display considerable ease in disclosing themselves to John on a mere suspicion that he might be gay, for example, Dave Kirkup.

When the hills at home have been discovered and climbed, John goes to France, where he ‘solves’ forty climbing ‘problems’<sup>87</sup> in one fit. This accomplishment brings the protagonist instant success and impresses the French elite climbers as “[f]or someone to appear and complete the tour on their first visit to L’Eléphant was almost unheard of” (71-72). This is a victory parade for the protagonist, especially because his achievement brings him the much desired feelings of camaraderie and belonging. But even this moment is darkened by John’s misgivings related to his sexuality.

The hero image of a climber is two-fold in *Todhra*: on the one hand, John climbs the most forbidding faces of rocks and grinds his teeth and keeps climbing even with the excruciating pain in his injured thigh, or ignoring cracked ribs and celebrating first and only then going to a hospital (the most prominent ‘parallel’ characters in this respect are Daniel Corder and Scott Fischer). On the other hand, John is at times presented as a weak personality: he feels very insecure because of his homosexuality; he is scared out of his wits when he takes a long fall and feels “a warm trickle between his legs” (43) thus repeating Abe Burns’ experience described in *The Ascent*. Whatever happens in

---

<sup>86</sup> John Menlove Edwards (1910-1958) was a psychiatrist and one of Britain’s leading climbers in the ‘30s and ‘40s. Menlove was homosexual at the times when homosexuality was a criminal offense in Britain and committed a suicide, not being able to bridge between rigid social norms and his own morality any longer.

<sup>87</sup> A ‘problem’ is a demanding short climb, usually worked out move by move, sometimes one at a time.

John's life, homoerotic experience seems to be the answer to it, and if John's partner of the day is not around he turns to the first guy who cares to advance him (miraculously, there is always one at hand). In this way, as mentioned in connection to other examples of modern mountaineering literature, the image of a climber is deconstructed and de-romanticized. Unlike the gentleman mountaineers, the climbers in *Todhra* are presented in their graphic entirety which leaves no space for speculations: climbing, partying, having sex (or suffering from sexually transmitted diseases) or answering the calls of nature.

After the accident on The Walker Spur, John is plagued by the feeling of guilt and is tormented by nightmares, in which Steve's "distorted face, accused him again and again" (86). Yet John's greatest problem is his sexuality, which gets disclosed to his climbing colleagues shortly after the fateful climb. John seems to suffer more from being an outcast and being confronted with constant derision from his former climbing peers and fans. This incident destroys the feeling of belonging, robbing the sport of something essential, in John's eyes. The feeling of belonging plays a very significant role for a climber and surfaces as an inherent element in numerous mountaineering texts (*High Adventure*, *Solo Faces*, *The Ascent*, *One Green Bottle*, etc.). In order to belong again, the protagonist is even prepared to take part in a climbing competition, which he has always rejected as damaging to the sport. John's climb is accompanied by abusive jeers and even after his success he senses hostility of the crowd. Despite the protagonist being the only climber to have reached the top during the competition, he is disqualified because of some minor technicality. Moreover he is not included into the British men's team contesting for the Grand Prix. The protagonist is devastated by this injustice, and his suffering is increased by the thought that "it had something to do with who and what he was" (110). A short while later, however, John becomes accepted by his peers again and Duncan invites him to join a Nanga Parbat expedition.

Nanga Parbat becomes a turning point in John's life. The protagonist is elated by his success. But Duncan is killed in the avalanche, and this death shocks John, who is overcome with the survival's guilt. At first, the protagonist is stunned and stupefied but then "[t]he need to survive quickly took hold of him and it wasn't until he was clear of the mountain that grief could take over" (140).

Duncan's tragic death emphasises John's own mortality and makes the protagonist reassess the price he has paid or might still pay for climbing and, like



Vernon Rand (*Solo Faces*) and Cathy Caning (*One Green Bottle*), realises that there is a life outside climbing and that there are so many things he would still like “to see, so much to do and know, so much to paint and so much to photograph” (143).

The novel reveals a number of parallels to other examples of mountaineering literature. *Todhra* repeats the belief that a climber killed in the mountains does not disappear from the earth, but his existence is sensed in the mountains. As Vernon Rand is aware of Bray’s presence so does John feel Duncan watching over him.

Another recurrent theme in climbing literature is the need of physical closeness to another human being in extreme situations. Yet such closeness has nothing to do with love or passion. Thus, in order to keep alive John and his remaining partner, Irma, depend on each other in the days following the avalanche and preceding their return to the Base Camp. As between Abe and Kelly (*The Ascent*), the relationship of John and Irma is purely platonic and is motivated only by self-preservation:

When awake they held onto each other like frightened children, teeth chattering. When asleep they continued to huddle shamelessly together, and finally got into the same sleeping bag to keep warm. There were no physical barriers between them, Irma stuck her hands between John’s thighs to warm them, and he stuck his hands down her duvet pants in his turn. Survival was all they cared about. (141)

Despite the attempts of the narrator to persuade the reader of John’s climbing prodigy and toughness by inserting episodes where the protagonist performs incredible fits on the rocks or grits his teeth and carries on, ignoring his pain or sufferings, John Firth comes across as a weak and shallow person scaling one rock face after another. The attempt to fill climbing with meaning equally seems to go amiss: the explanation of John’s need to climb does not extend beyond a mere statement that climbing is the protagonist’s life. The mountains seem to be only trophies he collects without any emotional connection to them apart from one homoerotic comparison of the rock and a male body mentioned above.

### **Other Climbing Characters**

The comments found in the novel regarding John’s peers allow the reader to construct a picture of the ultimate climber, which (even if poorly executed) corresponds to the image created in other fictional and non-fictional mountaineering texts. In *Todhra* it is a male climber in his twenties (whoever is over thirty is “old in extreme rock climbing circles” (33)), tough, possessing the will power; here the ultimate climbers are creative geniuses (see 51), willing to take risks, totally committed to their climbs. The

mountaineers shown in the novel are jovial and easy-going, occasionally undisciplined or enjoying “liberal amounts of alcohol, speed and dope” (36) and sometimes giving up a million dollar family business in order to pursue their climbing career, like, for example, John’s acquaintance Dave Kirkup. They are ‘naturals’ on the rocks but sometimes quite uncoordinated on the ground; they look half wild and engage at times in public displays of machismo (e.g., grabbing girls in bars). Some of the climbers present a very radical vision of climbing, found only on the fringe of climbing philosophy. Thus, Dave Kirkup pronounces that “‘Climbing is about dying. If you don’t want to die stay off the hard slate routes!’” (50). Yet this statement can be understood as an exact interpretation of climbing statistics rather than a death wish.

Steve Hart is one of John’s constant companions who reveals indispensable qualities of a ‘hard man’: although he lacks John’s technical skills as well as a creative genius, necessary to become a prodigy climber, the protagonist is left “in awe of his stamina” and his “gentler side,” that is his willingness “to take more than his share of cooking, preparing their bivouac sites, and making the essential drinks” (78).

On one occasion a woman climber is described in the novel as a man’s equal, and “[t]hough she was petite, she was as tough as any of them, carrying immense loads and leading and preparing the route in turn with her male companions” (125). On the descend from the mountain, Irma shows even more stamina than John as it is she who struggles “hour after hour to make a route in the chest deep snow” and climbs up and down “looking for the shelter, while John [is] wearily [holding] the rope vainly shouting into the falling snow for the others to come and help them” (141).

Along with commenting on the personalities of each of his climbing friends, the protagonist analyses the interpersonal relations between climbing partners and wonders about the peculiarities of climbing companionships that rarely extend beyond the activity: “[c]limbers are incredible people [...], they live together, eat together, sleep together, and sometimes even die together. They can be with a single partner for a week, in positions of extreme danger and intimacy but afterwards they are so casual, you would never guess that they had shared so much” (61).

Thus the only climber with whom John is befriended also outside mountaineering is Duncan. But even in this case all that is known about their friendship outside the sport is that John was Duncan’s best man, has spent some time with Duncan and his wife Jean and is going to be the godfather of Duncan’s son.

Another constituent of the presentation of climbers, apart from their character traits, is their visual appearance. As also in above-mentioned texts, *Todhra* offers comments on the aspects of mountaineering equipment and clothes, which round up the image of the mountaineer. Gear plays a highly significant role, as its purpose is to provide warmth, comfort and safety to the climbers. However, although nowadays mountaineering gear and clothes are infinitely better than those used by the early mountaineers, they still cause numerous inconveniences and offer ground for jokes and vituperations. For example, John's annoyance caused by his climbing attire is very similar to that found in Shipton's account *Upon That Mountain*. Almost 70 years later John

[...] felt like a yeti in all his climbing gear: a Pertex shell suit over a one-piece fibre pile outfit, in turn covering a woollen vest and long johns. His head was encased in a balaclava and crash helmet with skigoggles over his eyes; woollen gloves kept his hands warm inside leather mitts, and his climbing gear hung from a harness around his waist, whilst his ankles were encased in Gore-tex gaiters fitted over his boots. (79)

### **Climbing Philosophy**

John is a free spirit who appreciates the adventure climbing offers and for that reason he disapproves of such public show-offs as rock-climbing competitions. John's reluctance to take part in climbing competitions is explained by his concern "about the damage they might do to the long-term ethics and attitudes in a sport that had become his life" (32), because the imposture of competition rules contradicts the idea of freedom always associated with climbing. The only other mentioning of what ethics or attitudes John harbours is limited to the protagonist's preference of adventure to the mere development of technical skills. Yet the novel seems to focus more on the technical aspects of climbing rather than spiritual ones.

Although John voices no explicit reservations regarding the media, there is a hint at corruption of the mountaineering values due to the exaggerated public attention, which creates unnecessary outside pressure: "[t]he following seven days [John and his partner] had been followed by the world's media, with several chartered helicopters buzzing around like fly's as they climbed. Encased in one of the giant bugs had been Blythe Jones from Media International. They were paying all their expenses for a first refusal on their story if they were successful" (77).

Although, unlike in the previously considered mountaineering writings, there are no moral codes broken in *Todhra*, or at least they are not spelled out, the novel continues a tradition of featuring a drama which develops on a hard climb accompanied by the media. Like in *Solo Faces*, the Walker Spur climb goes awfully wrong and John's partner, Steve Hart, falls to his death.

The media play no flattering role in another climb: on Nanga Parbat the leader of the expedition, Winston Small, insists that John wait for Duncan to catch up with him and Irma, another team member, because he has to film the ascent. John is afraid that the weather will not hold and this wait can jeopardize not only the climb but also lives, yet Winston counters that "Our sponsors will be furious if we don't get some good footage" (126). This climb, too, results in a tragedy: as John is on his way from the summit of the North West Wall of Nanga Parbat, an avalanche kills Duncan, who is filming John's progress at that moment. John is shattered by this death and he is utterly incensed by Winston's preoccupation with "the fate of his [Duncan's] cine camera" (142).

### **The Meaning of Climbing**

Overall, John Firth's character is created in a way that represents a typical prodigy climber of nowadays: very skilled and strong but also vulnerable and imperfect. Climbing is announced to be the centre of John's universe. It is also the source of the feeling of belonging and a metaphor for achievement and success. Yet the statement about climbing as the sense of the protagonist's life, or as an obsession is underpinned by very few thoughts, emotions or actions further supporting this proclamation.

Although the reader is constantly reminded how important for the protagonist this activity is, the impression that John scales the mountains for the lack of anything better to do and without any higher aspirations, lingers. In contrast to other mountaineering texts analyzed above, in which climbing is presented as a metaphor for achievement, a way to escape the mundane, or as a quest for enlightenment, John's feelings about the most significant constituent of his life and its meaning are either poorly related or merely absent.

### Summary

This thesis opens with an examination of historical and social contexts of travel as well as the changes of these contexts in the course of time, for example, the shift in motivation for travelling, which was initially prompted by geopolitical, religious, military and economic reasons but was later stimulated by the wish for “education,” entertainment, and by the need of departing and homecoming. The influences of travel experience on literature and the emergence of travel narratives are analysed and special attention is given to the fact that the line between fact and fiction is blurred at times. However, both travel fiction and non-fiction share a significant characteristic feature – the theme of a quest: for material gain, for new experiences and knowledge, or for higher intellectual and spiritual awareness.

Mountaineering literature is put into the context of travel literature since mountaineering/climbing is a specific mode of travel. A general survey of the role of mountains in literature is offered together with a short abstract of the history of mountaineering.

The study explores the development of the intellectual and aesthetic appreciation of mountains and traces the shifts between the vision of the mountains as places inspiring the feelings of either awe and grandeur or those of terror and repulsion. To use Marjorie H. Nicolson’s terms, the mountains have always been regarded as places of either “gloom” or “glory”; for example, in the classical world they were considered the dwellings of gods, divine places, where revelations were unveiled. Such a sacred vision of mountains was contrasted with a 17<sup>th</sup> century concept of the mountains as blemishes on the face of the earth, their rugged surfaces providing evidence of the “sinful” origin of the mountains as consequences of the Deluge. These concepts gave rise to reflections on the aesthetic quality of the mountains in nature and the notion of the sublime developed from their being different from beauty, as beauty was identified with delicacy and harmony and the sublime with vastness, obscurity, and a capacity to inspire terror. For example, Edmund Burke considered the beautiful aesthetically pleasing and believed that the sublime has the power to compel or destroy one. He maintained that only an object or an idea that evokes the strongest emotions of horror, danger or pain can produce the feeling of the sublime.

The mountains as a source of the sublime are presented in numerous literary works of the Romantic period and found their way into the poetry of William

Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and later Matthew Arnold and James Hilton. The development of a positive picture of the mountains in literature became decisive in changing their image as wild and evil places, in promoting their role in the experience of the sublime, and in encouraging their exploration. This development is believed to have greatly contributed to the emergence of mountain literature.

The romantic vision of the mountains as places that thrilled strong minds by the magnitude of space and the power of nature was followed by the vision of the mountains as places where one could escape the madness of civilization and spiritual depression, a by-product of rapid progress and industrial development in the Victorian Age. Thus, a number of social, industrial, religious and scientific changes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were significant factors in prompting people to start appreciating and looking for the wilderness; mountains began to be seen as the last outposts of the wilderness and simplicity of life in nature. At the same time, as rapid technical progress and improvements in transportation made travelling more comfortable and the mountains more easily accessible, the Alps lost part of their mystique and romance. Although the last seemingly unscalable summits in the Alps were only climbed in the late 1930s, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had become quite familiar and ‘civilized’. Those who longed for the frontier and the virgin territories turned their glances towards the Himalaya and Karakoram regions. Increased attention to the mountains and mountain exploration made them a popular topic in non-fiction and fiction.

The books selected for this thesis follow and exemplify major developments and tendencies in mountaineering which have found their reflection in climbing literature, for example, the exploration of the Himalaya and Karakoram ranges, the introduction of the Alpine expedition style as opposed to the siege tactics; the emergence of woman mountaineers, a change in the social class of mountaineers from a gentleman mountaineer or lady mountaineer to the representatives of the working class, etc.

The books under consideration in this study do not imitate one another closely in terms of character presentation, landscape depiction or climbing philosophy but rather complement each other, thus jointly presenting a “panoramic” view of climbing characters, their value systems, and mountaineering ethics. This fact also accounts for slight differences in the way the texts are presented in this result of my research.

The mountaineering texts of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century present climbing a high mountain as a task to be completed (see *Upon That Mountain, High Adventure, The Ascent of Rum Doodle*). Any difficulties on a route are seen as problems that demand technical know-how and strong nerves. The mountains are seen as objects, not as living beings. Yet although they are not presented as adversaries, as in the most recent texts, the mountains are placed at the centre of ‘military’ operations, which becomes evident from the vocabulary applied when describing the climbs. For example, Edmund Hillary employs such terms as “attack,” to “force the route,” to “push forward,” to “shatter defences,” to lead “a long and hot battle,” etc. Eric Shipton was probably an exception in this respect as he was opposed to large military-style expeditions, popular in his time, a fact that explains the absence of military vocabulary as regards mountains and climbs in his books. The only time when Shipton does use such terminology is when he expresses his resentment towards “the sight of a huge army invading the peaceful valley.”

In *Solo Faces*, *The Ascent* and *Into Thin Air*, the immense powers of the mountains often appear as the source of ‘unprovoked malice,’ which, in its turn, invites the interpretation of the mountain as a beast possessing its own will and mind, waiting to kill. The ascent of a mountain is oftentimes presented in these modern texts as ‘waging a war.’ For example, in *Solo Faces*, Rand believes that the mountains are watching him and starts to think of them as his antagonists at some point, although the opposition between Rand and the mountains is less prominent than the one presented in *The Ascent*, where Everest is seen as a being watching the climbers and waiting to gain an advantage from their missteps. As in *Solo Faces*, the mountaineers seem to wage war against a beast. In *Into Thin Air*, the climbers believe that they have made the mountain angry and now are suffering its revenge.

*One Green Bottle*, *Beyond the Mountain*, *The Climb* and *Todhra* also present a tough mountaineer and an extremely skilled climber, who, despite their super-human abilities, remain very humane in their weaknesses and vices. In these books (with the exception of *Todhra*), the protagonists (and the author in *The Climb*) see the mountains as places rich in spirituality, as temples. The mountains pacify them and are a means of helping them find their place in the world.

Despite the fact that the texts analyzed in this research are very different, they all show many shared aspects such as special bonds many climbers develop to the mountains,



common values prevalent in climbing circles, a characteristic understanding of mortality, and the existence of an unwritten moral code, the breach of which is punished by the natural power. Related to these aspects are the issues of commercial mountaineering and the pressure it puts on the climbers, or on the guides leading sometimes inexperienced clients to the highest summits of the world, or, as is often the case, to their untimely death. The examined books provide descriptions of the experience of the sublime evoked by the overwhelming phenomena in the landscape, a feeling that combines awe inspired by the majestic sights and a fear brought about by witnessing the immense power of the mountains and their destructive potential. The last and the most important recurring feature in mountaineering literature is the presence of the dramatic figure of a strong, tough and exceptionally skilled climber who has placed mountains in the centre of his/her universe; for him/her climbing becomes not only an addiction and a definition of life but also a quest for revelation and enlightenment. It is an expression of the need to be high, wild and free, to do what has not been done before, thus, in Julius Evola's words, "to ascend to the top of the self."



## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Arthur, Elisabeth. *Beyond the Mountain*. 1<sup>st</sup> Pavanne ed. London: Pan, 1986.
- Boukreev, Anatoly, and DeWalt, G. Weston. *The Climb: Tragic Ambitions on Everest*. 1<sup>st</sup> St. Martin's Griffin ed. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.
- Bowman, W. E. *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Arrow, 1983.
- Coxhead, Elizabeth. "One Green Bottle." *One Step in the Clouds: An Omnibus of Mountaineering Novels and Short Stories*. Ed. Audry Salked and Rosie Smith. London: Diadem Books, 1990. 363-518.
- Gray, Dennis. Todhra. Leeds: Flux Gallery, 2005.
- Hillary, Edmund. *High Adventure*. London: Companion Book Club, 1956.
- Krakauer, Jon. *Into Thin Air*. New York: Villard, 1997.
- Long, Jeff. *The Ascent*. New York: William Morrow, 1992.
- Shipton, Eric. *Upon That Mountain*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Pan, 1956.

### General Primary Sources

- Addison, Joseph. "On the Pleasures of the Imagination." *Spectator*. Ed. Donald F. Bond. 3. 411-418. Oxford: Clarendon, 1965. 535-579.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of 'Oberman.'" *Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan, 1910.
- "Empedocles on Etna", "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse." *Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan, 1910.
- Blum, Arlene. *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*. 1983. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1983.
- Boukreev, Anatoli. "The Roads We Choose." *American Alpine Journal* 38.70 (1996). 17 Jan. 2009  
<[http://www.americanalpineclub.org/AAJO/pdfs/1996/29\\_boukreev\\_everest\\_aaj1996.pdf#search="boukreev">](http://www.americanalpineclub.org/AAJO/pdfs/1996/29_boukreev_everest_aaj1996.pdf#search=).
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1756. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Dodsley, 1761.
- Burnet, Thomas. *Sacred Theory of the Earth*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: R. Norton, 1691.

Byron, George Gordon (Lord Byron). "Manfred." *The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Vol. IV. Oxford: Clarendon, 1986.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Vol. I: Poems. Oxford: Clarendon, 1912.

Connelly, Robert. "Living with Death: The Meaning of Acceptance." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 43.1 (2003): 45-63.

Curran, Jim. *K2: The Story of the Savage Mountain*. Seattle: Mountaineers, 1995.

Evola, Julius. *Meditations on the Peaks: Mountain Climbing as Metaphor for the Spiritual Quest*. Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1998.

Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 1915. Vol. 14. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1970.

Furlons, William Berry. "Doctor Danger." *Outside* January 1981: 40-96.

Gray, Thomas. *The Letters of Thomas Gray*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Duncan C. Tovey. Vol. 1. London: George Bell and Sons, 1909.

Hakewill, George. *An Apologie*. 1627. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: William Turner, 1635.

Hardy, David. "The McDonaldization of Mountaineering: Conflicts between rock climbing culture and dominant value systems in society." Oct. 2002. 30 May 2009 <<http://www.staff.livjm.ac.uk/olfdhard/Academic%20Article.htm>>.

Harris, David. "Vortex." *One Step in the Clouds: An Omnibus of Mountaineering Novels and Short Stories*. Ed. Audry Salked and Rosie Smith. London: Diadem Books, 1990. 821-1023.

Harrison, M. John. *Climbers*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Phoenix, 2004.

Hilton, James *Lost Horizon*. 1933. New York: Pocket, 1960.

House, Humphry. *All in Due Time: The Collected Essays and Broadcast Talks of Humphry House*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Soho Square, 1955.

Houston, Charles S., and Bates, Robert H. *K2 – The Savage Mountain*. New York: McGraw – Hill, 1954.

Jonston, Scott. "Scott Jonston's Personal Philosophy on Light and Fast Alpine Climbing." Dec. 1998. 12 Apr. 2009 <[http://www.traditionalmountaineering.org/FAQ\\_Light\\_Fast\\_MidgeCross.htm](http://www.traditionalmountaineering.org/FAQ_Light_Fast_MidgeCross.htm)>.

Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Berkeley: U of California, 1960.

Knight, Richard Payne. *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*. London: T. Payne and J. White, 1805.

Krakauer, Jon. *Eiger Dreams: Ventures Among Men and Mountains*. New York: Anchor, 1990.

Lester, James. "Spirit, Identity, and Self in Mountaineering." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44.1 (2004): 86-100.

Long. "Biography." Home page. 13 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.jefflongbooks.com/biography.html>>.

Long. "Books." Home Page. 13 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.jefflongbooks.com/books.html#wall>>.

Mawer, Simon. *The Fall*. Boston: Back Bay, 2004.

May, Rollo. *Existential Psychology*. Toronto, Canada: CBC, 1967.

Mazel, David, ed. *Mountaineering Women: Stories by Early Climbers*. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1994.

Moraglia, Giampaolo. "On Facing Death: Views of Some Prominent Psychologists." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44.3 (2004): 337-357.

Muir, John. *Nature Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1997.

Piana, Paul. *Big Walls: Breakthroughs on the Free-Climbing Frontier*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1997.

Prichard, Paul. "Writing as Catharsis – An Essay". 9 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.paulpritchard.com.au/catharsis.pdf>>.

Roberts, David. "Like Water and Like Wind." *One Step in the Clouds: An Omnibus of Mountaineering Novels and Short Stories*. Ed. Audry Salked and Rosie Smith. London: Diadem Books, 1990. 631-702.

Roberts, David. *Moments of Doubt and Other Mountaineering Writings*. Seattle: Mountaineers, 1986.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. "Mother Goddess of the World." *One Step in the Clouds: An Omnibus of Mountaineering Novels and Short Stories*. Ed. Audry Salked and Rosie Smith. London: Diadem Books, 1990. 287-332.

Roth, Arthur. *Eiger, Wall of Death*. New York: W-W-Norton, 1982.

Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*. London: George Allen, 1894. 10 May 2008  
< <http://ruskin.classicauthors.net/SesameAndLilies>>.

Salked, Audry and Smith, Rosie, eds. *One Step in the Clouds: An Omnibus of Mountaineering Novels and Short Stories*. London: Diadem Books, 1990.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Alastor." *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Oxford: Claredon, 1904.

---. "Mont Blanc." *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Oxford: Claredon, 1904.

Simpson, Joe. *Dark Shadows Falling*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1997.

Simpson, Joe. "On Surviving Till 40." NoOrdinaryJoe. 1 Aug. 2000. 30 May 2009 <[http://www.noordinaryjoe.co.uk/article\\_7.asp](http://www.noordinaryjoe.co.uk/article_7.asp)>.

Stephen, Leslie. *Men, Books and Mountains*. London: Hogarth, 1956.

Tabin, Geoff. *Blind Corners*. Connecticut: Lyons, 2002.

Talbot, Daniel, ed. *A Treasury of Mountaineering Stories*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1954.

Tenderini, Mirella. *Gary Hemming: The Beatnik of the Alps*. Transl. Susan Hodgkiss. Ernest, 1995.

Terray, Lionel. *The Borders of the Impossible*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1964.

Twight, Marc. "Enchanting the Alps: Notes on Preparation." *Summit Journal* 1996. 31 May 2009 <<http://outside.away.com/peaks/twight/intro.html>>.

Vause, Mikel. *On Mountains and Mountaineers*. La Crescenta: Mountain N' Air, 1993.

Vause, Mikel, ed. *Philosophy of Mountaineering: Peering Over the Edge*. La Crescenta: Mountain N' Air, 2005  
<[http://books.google.at/books?id=msQqBMVFejQC&pg=PA438&lpg=PA438&dq=%22are+seen+as+somewhat+deranged%22&source=bl&ots=aquiHdId-N&sig=nmYhOxIh8xHoOOqz9B3ljCEiJBE&hl=de&ei=PGvfSd2bFqPsAaW0JDPCA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1](http://books.google.at/books?id=msQqBMVFejQC&pg=PA438&lpg=PA438&dq=%22are+seen+as+somewhat+deranged%22&source=bl&ots=aquiHdId-N&sig=nmYhOxIh8xHoOOqz9B3ljCEiJBE&hl=de&ei=PGvfSd2bFqPsAaW0JDPCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1)>.

Weathers, Beck and Michaud, Stephen G. *Left For Dead*. New York: Villard, 2000.

Weil, Elizabeth. "Babes on Belay." *Outside*. Apr. 2005. 31 May 2009 <[http://outside.away.com/outside/features/200504/climber-girls\\_1.html](http://outside.away.com/outside/features/200504/climber-girls_1.html)>.

Wickwire, Jim. *Addicted to Danger*. New York: Pocket, 1998.

Wordsworth, William. "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth: Poems Founded on the Affections. Poems on the Naming of Places. Poems on the Fancy. Poems on the Imagination*. Ed. E. deSelincourt. Oxford: Claredon, 1944.

---. *The Prelude*. Ed. James Coutts Maxwell. Reprint. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1971.

Ullman, James Ramsey. *The White Tower*. London: Collins, 1946.

## Secondary Sources

Adams, G. Percy. *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1983.

Chrysanthou, Marc. Rev. of *Todhra*, by Dennis Gray. *UKClimbing*. Nov. 2005. 13 Mar. 2009  
<<http://www.ukclimbing.com/gear/review.php?id=146>>.

Cocker, Mark. *Loneliness and Time: British Travel Writing in the Twentieth Century*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1992.

Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999.

Dirda, Michael. "A Spiritual Challenge on the Face of an Alp." Rev. of *Solo Faces*, by James Salter. *Washington Post Book World*, 9 July 1979.

Elmes, Michael and Barry, David. "Deliverance, Denial, and the Death Zone: A Study of Narcissism and Regression in the May 1996 Everest Climbing Disaster." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 35.2 (June 1999): 163-187.

Fussell, Paul. *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.

Gifford, Terry. "History." *Festival of Mountaineering Literature*. 25 Febr. 2008  
<<http://www.festivalofmountaineeringliterature.co.uk/history.htm>>.

Himma, Kenneth Eimar. "Natural Law." *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. 13 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>>.

Hynes, Samuel. "A Teller of Tales Tells His Own." *New York Times Book Review*, 7 Sept. 1997. 9 Apr. 2009  
<<http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:YvJTVYTGC1cJ:www.nytimes.com/books/97/09/07/reviews/970907.07hynest.html+%22Conrad+and+Hemingway+and+Malraux%22&cd=3&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=at>>.

Jahn, Manfred. *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*. 2005. English Department, U of Cologne. 6 Nov. 2008  
<<http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm#N2.2>>.

Jervis, Steven. Rev. of *Beyond the Mountain*, by Elizabeth Arthur. *American Alpine Journal*, 1984. 28 May 2009  
<[http://www.americanalpineclub.org/documents/pdf/aaj/1984/317\\_reviews\\_aaj1984.pdf](http://www.americanalpineclub.org/documents/pdf/aaj/1984/317_reviews_aaj1984.pdf)>.

Kamerling, Garth. "Sublime." *Philosophy Pages*. 2006. 9 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/s9.htm>>.

Knowlton, Elisabeth. Rev. of *One Green Bottle*, by Elizabeth Coxhead. *American Alpine Journal*, 1952. 20 Febr. 2009

<[http://americanalpineclub.org/documents/pdf/aaj/1952/322\\_BookReviews\\_aaj1952.pdf#search=coxhead](http://americanalpineclub.org/documents/pdf/aaj/1952/322_BookReviews_aaj1952.pdf#search=coxhead)>.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Seattle: U of Washington, 1997.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. "Sublime in External Nature." *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Walter, Hugo G. *Space and Time on the Magic Mountain: Studies in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century European Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.

Wilkins, Thurman. *John Muir: Apostle of Nature*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1995.



## Index

- Addiction 2, 91, 35, 41-42, 45, 81, 115, 127, 174, 193, 235
- Adversary 26, 76, 87, 116, 127, 152, 233
- Aesthetic 11-13, 15, 19-21, 48, 53, 56, 78, 148, 195, 197, 222
- Affirmation 15, 20, 41, 43, 95, 101
- Alienation 9, 20, 59, 64, 101, 107-10, 113-114, 149-50, 154, 158, 193
- Alps 11, 13, 20, 23-25, 28-30, 33, 51, 58, 73, 81, 89, 116, 145, 166, 176, 221-22, 233
- Anatoly Boukreev 66, 101, 145-47, 152, 160-65, 167-69, 176-84, 186-91, 197
- Andrew Irvine 34, 63
- Animal 3, 9, 46, 77, 81-82, 107-108, 113, 118, 123-24, 126, 162, 200
- Anthony Ashley Cooper 11
- Anticlimax 60, 109-10, 155, 223
- Awareness 19-21, 47-48, 58, 65, 75, 77-78, 85-88, 89, 95, 101, 105, 107, 109, 111, 115-116, 118, 123, 149, 155, 157-58, 202, 216, 221-22, 227
- Awe 10-11, 17-18, 21, 26, 52, 58-59, 64, 74, 77-78, 111-13, 117, 120, 148, 180, 203, 207, 222, 228, 232, 236
- Beast 10, 43-44, 75-77, 83, 94, 113-16, 234
- Betrayal 38, 87, 94, 98-100, 106, 128-30, 138-41, 158, 179, 212
- Bond 22, 42, 84, 89, 94, 105, 108, 144, 182, 198, 205-206, 209, 211
- Chamois/Chamonix 15, 17, 24, 29, 55, 69, 71-73, 82-83, 86, 89, 94, 97, 100, 219
- Charles Dickens 13, 25
- Chomolungma 10, 26, 34
- Civilization 9-10, 21-24, 30, 45, 49, 66, 73, 101, 105, 109, 111, 122-23, 129, 134, 150, 154, 182, 206, 233
- Climax 58, 138
- Commercialisation 20, 36, 69, 97, 146, 148, 151, 160-61, 168, 171-72, 186
- Connection 31, 40, 44, 56, 74, 81, 83, 86, 89, 92, 95, 134, 161, 164, 168, 179, 187, 196, 200, 206, 209, 212, 215, 226-27
- Corruption 49, 96, 98-100, 136, 171, 174, 186, 202, 206, 212, 230
- Creature 17, 25, 40, 44, 64, 113-14, 118, 132, 149, 178, 195, 202
- Death zone 119, 154-55, 178
- Deconstruction 110, 123, 226
- Demons 4, 50, 106, 110, 126, 129, 132, 135, 137, 141-43, 205
- Dennis Gray 217
- De-romanticized image 110, 121-22, 125, 150, 226
- Disappointing summit 60, 109-10, 155
- Disillusionment 45, 72, 86-88, 91, 95, 101-102, 139, 215, 220
- Doom 74, 137, 149
- Edmund Burke 12, 20, 78

- Edmund Hillary 25, 34-35, 43, 51-53, 58-63, 70, 84, 150, 152-55, 166, 175, 197, 206, 234
- Enemy 26, 77, 107, 116-17, 151, 195
- Enlightenment 6, 40, 45, 47, 86, 94, 121, 132, 142, 161, 175, 216, 235
- Eric Shipton 25, 33, 43, 51-58, 60-63, 66, 70, 84, 150, 152-53, 197, 200, 229, 234
- Escape 2, 28, 41-42, 45, 49-50, 66, 106, 127, 135, 137, 141, 203, 210, 214, 233
- Eternity 16-19, 21, 41, 75, 107, 124, 170, 179, 187, 210
- Flood 10, 18, 22, 93, 151
- Foreign 2, 5, 8-9, 21, 30, 40, 133, 149
- Freedom 16-17, 41, 44, 52, 56, 58, 80-81, 83, 88, 171, 182, 186, 194-195, 230
- Frontier 30-31, 33, 49, 109, 159, 170, 233
- Gary Hemming 45, 69-70, 92, 98
- Gentleman 2, 43-44, 70, 200, 226, 233
- George Gordon Byron 16, 232
- George Hakewill 10, 13
- George Mallory 25, 34-35, 63, 150, 153, 162, 175
- Gloom 10, 14, 21, 25, 52, 59, 139, 149, 194, 232
- Glory 10, 14, 25, 52, 59, 82, 98, 127, 142-43, 149-50, 194-195, 232
- Grandeur 12, 14-15, 17, 19, 21, 26-27, 52-53, 56, 59-60, 119, 148, 158, 180, 196, 207, 222
- Guilt 2, 23, 128, 130, 137-38, 165, 171, 173, 176, 193, 205, 210, 213, 216, 226
- Hero 2, 9-10, 38, 46, 69, 89, 95, 110, 121-25, 129, 163, 165, 186, 225
- Hostile surroundings 24, 53, 59, 64, 76, 107, 111, 119, 135, 151-54, 178, 195, 207, 221-22
- Identity 9, 46-47, 100-101, 109, 214, 225
- Immanuel Kant 12-13, 78
- Isaac Newton 11
- James Hilton 13, 21, 232
- Jargon 39, 70, 217
- Jeff Long 23, 33, 40, 103, 121, 164
- John Dennis 11
- John Krakauer 8, 23, 26, 28, 32, 34, 68, 136, 143-56, 158, 160-64, 166-69, 177, 180, 195, 197
- John Muir 22, 24-25, 31
- John Ruskin 13-14, 25
- Joseph Addison 11-13
- Julius Evola 10, 19, 22, 30, 41, 46, 48-49, 83, 86, 95, 102, 142, 235
- Karakoram 24, 26, 31-34, 65
- Kore Wall 103, 105, 107-108, 112, 120, 126-28
- Legend 72, 87-88, 96, 99, 103, 110
- Leslie Stephen 23, 25, 32
- Marjorie H. Nicolson 10, 12, 14, 19, 25, 232
- Martin Conway 23, 25-26, 32

- Matthew Arnold 13, 20-22
- Monster 4, 10, 77, 103, 114, 222
- Mont Blanc 13, 15, 17-19, 23-25, 29, 77-78, 190, 222
- Moral code 44, 48, 212, 230, 234
- Moral crime 140-41
- Mortality 17-18, 20-21, 38, 47, 74, 84, 94-95, 107, 130, 132, 157, 162, 170, 172, 209, 222, 226
- Myth 3, 35, 38-39, 47, 69, 71, 81, 95, 162, 165, 222
- Narrative 4, 6-8, 38-40, 62, 70, 81, 85, 125, 149, 176, 178, 197, 212, 217, 224, 232
- Natural law 99, 140
- Nepal 34, 103, 106, 113, 130, 137, 141, 148, 150, 159, 207, 214-16
- Obsession 36, 50, 54, 85, 105, 124, 126, 128, 143, 161, 174-75, 231
- Outcast 10, 80-81, 101, 212, 226
- Percy Bysshe Shelley 15-18, 20, 24, 52, 232
- Pressure 92, 97-99, 171-72, 186, 213, 230
- Prodigy 2, 44-45, 81, 89-90, 162, 197-198, 200, 219, 225, 227-28, 231
- Pseudo-Longinus 11
- Punishment 98, 137, 140-41, 202, 212
- Revelation 10, 25, 48, 59, 94-95, 121-22, 130, 141, 179, 207, 215, 219, 224, 232, 235
- Risk 32, 36, 40-42, 47-48, 78, 103, 142, 161, 163, 170, 175, 183, 186-87, 200, 227
- Romantic 3, 5, 9, 13-14, 19-20, 22, 28-29, 31-32, 36, 46, 48, 74, 122-23, 153, 160, 162-63, 171, 184, 210, 226, 231
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge 16-17, 52, 232
- Snowdon 15-16, 195
- Solo 9, 45, 69-70, 75, 77, 85, 90, 94, 96, 101, 107, 116, 121, 127, 160, 163, 172, 183, 178, 183, 194, 198, 202, 210, 213, 215, 217, 222, 226-27, 230, 234
- Spiritual redemption 108, 129, 141
- Sublime 10-19, 22, 25, 43, 52-53, 58-59, 63-64, 77-78, 94, 107, 110, 112-14, 120, 157, 179-80, 194, 203, 206-207, 221-22, 232, 234
- Suicide 45, 91-92, 125-26, 143
- Super-human 17, 43, 66, 84, 110, 113, 121, 161, 165-66, 182, 234
- Supernatural 10, 17, 43-44, 46, 84
- Superstition 43-44, 46-47, 92-93, 130-32, 140, 149, 166-67, 184-85, 212
- Tenzing Norgay 35, 52, 58, 62, 175
- Thomas Burnet 10-11, 152
- Thomas Gray 12
- Ultimate climber/mountaineer 47, 53-54, 61, 81, 125, 161-62, 164-66, 174, 176, 181, 184, 197, 209, 227
- Universe 11, 14-15, 17-18, 48, 75, 81, 175, 189, 197, 209, 231, 235
- Vagabond 2, 45, 60-61, 85, 89
- Vice 44, 99, 200, 224, 234

Virgin territory 41, 55, 59-60, 109, 142, 233

Vulnerability 111, 170, 222

Weakness 43-44, 55, 61, 66, 84, 199, 234

Wilderness 16, 24, 30-31, 64, 83, 101, 111-12, 121, 123, 125, 134, 204, 233

William Wordsworth 13-14, 16-17, 20-21, 24, 47, 52, 232

### **Abstract**

This research aims to place mountaineering fiction in the context of travel literature and to try and define mountaineering fiction as well as to examine where the line between fact and fiction can be drawn in mountaineering literature.

The study explores the development of the intellectual and aesthetic appreciation of the mountains and traces the shifts between the vision of the mountains as places of “gloom” and “glory”. This process also greatly contributed to the augmentation of the philosophical concept of the sublime, a notion different from beauty and explained as a result of experiencing something grand, terrible and exhilarating and awe-inspiring at the same time. The concept of the sublime was given prominence by Anthony Ashley Cooper, John Dennis, Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, among others.

The mountains as a source of the sublime are seen in numerous literary works and found their way into the poetry of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Matthew Arnold, James Hilton and are described as sublime places nowadays.

After having contextualized mountaineering literature in the scope of travel writings, the thesis proceeds with the comparison of actual mountaineering accounts and mountaineering fiction in terms of the presentation of the character of a climber and climbing philosophy, the construction of character, and the transformation it has gone through in the last hundred years in mountaineering fiction and non-fiction.

This research aims to analyze the themes and characters surfacing in mountaineering literature as well as the shifts in the themes and characters in the course of time and offers evidence that there exists a certain universality in the presentation of a climber usually shown as a representative of one of several categories.

The study also explores the motives for writing mountaineering fiction and non-fiction and offers evidence that personal experiences in mountaineering oftentimes are a strong stimulus for writing as a means to re-examine experiences, to revise preconceptions, to address the feeling of guilt, to remember people lost, finally, to explain one’s feelings to the world, and thus, to become more understood and accepted.

The role of the landscape in the presentation of characters is studied, because ‘foreign’ setting is one of the essentials of mountaineering writing as it emphasises (or reveals) the traits not so obvious in an ordinary location.

Climbing philosophy is an additional aspect that helps to reveal the essentials of the character of a mountaineer as it considers values prevalent in climbing circles,

special bonds many climbers develop to the mountains, and a characteristic understanding of mortality, and offers different visions of what guiding principles or ethic norms should be central to climbing. The thesis also analyses the meaning mountaineering has for an individual climber, that is the covert meaning of climbing going beyond the enjoyment of a physical activity or fresh air, and varying from an attempt to escape the mundane to climbing as a way to enlightenment.

The study mostly, but not exclusively, deals with long texts (novels, personal accounts), but also includes the examination of short texts (short stories and articles). The main focus of the study rests on the individual, but as an integral part of a group. The research is based on British and North American writings.

### Abstract

Die von dieser Forschungsarbeit angestrebten Ziele sind es Bergsteigerliteratur in den Kontext von Reiseliteratur zu setzen, den Begriff Bergsteigerliteratur zu definieren, sowie zu eruieren wo die Grenze zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit in eben jenem Genre zu ziehen ist.

Die Studie hinterfragt die Entwicklung der intellektuellen und ästhetischen Wahrnehmung der Berge und verfolgt die Änderung der Sichtweise der Berge von Orten der Finsternis zu Orten der Herrlichkeit. Dieser Prozess trug auch wesentlich zur Steigerung des philosophischen Konzeptes des Sublimen bei, ein Begriff der sich von Schönheit differenziert und als Resultat des Erlebens einer zur gleichen Zeit prachtvollen, schrecklichen, anregenden und ehrfurchtgebietenden Erfahrung gesehen wird. Das Konzept des Sublimen wurde unter anderem von Anthony Ashley Cooper, John Dennis, Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke geprägt.

Die Berge werden in unzähligen literarischen Werken als eine Quelle des Sublimen gesehen, haben auch ihren Weg in die Dichtkunst von William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Matthew Arnold, James Hilton gefunden und werden bis heute als erhabene Orte beschrieben.

Nachdem Bergsteigerliteratur im Bereich der Reiseliteratur kontextualisiert wurde, setzt diese Dissertation mit dem Vergleich von realen Bergsteigerberichten und fiktiver Bergsteigerliteratur fort. Hier wird insbesondere auf die Präsentation des Charakters eines Bergsteigers und die Bergsteigerphilosophie, die Konstruktion eines Charakters und dessen Wandlung in den letzten hundert Jahren in Belletristik und Sachliteratur mit alpinem Inhalt eingegangen.

Diese Forschungsarbeit strebt eine Analyse der in der Bergsteigerliteratur vorkommenden Motive und Charaktere und deren Wandel im Laufe der Zeit an und belegt, dass es in der Beschreibung eines Bergsteigers eine gewisse Universalität gibt, die als repräsentativ für eine von mehreren Kategorien gilt.

Diese Dissertation untersucht außerdem die Motive, die dem Verfassen von Belletristik und Sachliteratur mit alpinem Inhalt zu Grunde liegen und belegt desweiteren, dass persönliche Erfahrungen im Bereich des Bergsteigens oft den Stimulus für das Abfassen solcher Werke darstellen. Auf diesem Wege wird nämlich der Versuch gewagt, eigene Erfahrungen nochmals zu prüfen, Vorurteile zu revidieren, das Gefühl der Schuld aufzuarbeiten, verstorbener Leute zu gedenken, um,

schlussendlich, seine Gefühle der Welt erkenntlich zu machen und besser verstanden und akzeptiert zu werden.

Die Rolle des Landschaftsbildes im Bezug zur Präsentation der Charaktere wird beleuchtet, denn eine „fremde“ Kulisse ist ein essentielles Merkmal der Bergsteigerliteratur, da es jene Charakteristika hervorhebt (oder verbirgt), die in einer gewöhnlichen Umgebung nicht so augenfällig sind.

Die Philosophie des Bergsteigens stellt einen zusätzlichen Aspekt dar, welcher sich als förderlich erweist, um die essentiellen Charaktereigenschaften eines Bergsteigers/einer Bergsteigerin enthüllen zu können. Desweiteren werden mit Hilfe dieser philosophischen Elemente jene Werte untersucht, die in Kletterkreisen vorherrschend sind, dazu gehören ein charakteristisches Verständnis von Sterblichkeit und verschiedene Ansichten welche leitenden Prinzipien oder ethische Normen zentral in der Kletterei sein sollten, sowie die spezielle Beziehung, welche die BergsteigerInnen zu den Bergen entwickeln.

Diese Dissertation erläutert außerdem die Bedeutung, welche das Bergsteigen für den Alpinisten hat, d.h. sie analysiert die verborgene Bedeutung von Klettern selbst über das pure Genießen von physischer Anstrengung und frischer Luft hinaus, und legt diverse andere Aspekte dieser Aktivität frei, vom Versuch dem Mondänen zu entfliehen bis zum Streben nach Erleuchtung.

Obwohl sich diese Arbeit zum Großteil mit längeren Texten (Romanen, persönlichen Erzählungen) beschäftigt, ist auch eine Untersuchung von kürzeren Texten (Kurzgeschichten und Artikel) beinhaltet. Das Hauptaugenmerk der Analysen liegt auf dem Individuum als integraler Teil einer Gruppe. Die Forschung basiert auf britischer und nordamerikanischer Literatur.



### **Lebenslauf**

- 03.2003 – 07.2009*     Doktoratstudium an der Universität Wien,  
                                  Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
- 07.2003-02.2005 und*
- 10.2005-05.2006*     Mitarbeiterin beim Literaturforschungsprojekt mit dem Titel  
                                  „What is/was there? Transatlantic Memories in Canadian  
                                  Literature“, welches von Univ. Prof. Dr. W. Zacharasiewicz  
                                  (Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik) betreut wurde.
- 04.2001-02.2003*     Englischlektorin an der Stefanyk Universität,  
                                  Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine
- 07.1994-06.1999*     Stefanyk Universität, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine  
                                  Akademischer Grad: Specialist (entspricht “Magister der  
                                  Philosophie” lt. Bescheid des Bundesministeriums für Bildung,  
                                  Wissenschaft und Kultur: GZ 53.011/70-VII/11/2004)  
                                  Hauptfach: Anglistik (Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft)  
                                  Nebenfach: Anglistik Lehramt, Germanistik